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Growing Up Black in America: Finding One's Identity in *Manchild in the Promised Land*, *Sag Harbor* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones*

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Dedicated to

My father Emilio

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Identidade, afro americano, bildungsroman

RESUMO: Através duma leitura pormenorizada de *Manchild in the Promised Land* de Claude Brown, *Sag Harbor* de Colson Whitehead e *Brown Girl, Brownstones* de Paule Marshall como exemplos de Bildungsroman, esta dissertação visa enfatizar a fluidez deste género comparando o Bildungsroman tradicional com o Bildungsroman étnico e demonstrar como esses romances desafiam o género do Bildungsroman tradicional reformulando as suas características. Ao analisar os percursos de personagem Afro Americanos, este trabalho propõe uma leitura diversificada dos aspetos sociais e culturais do Bildungsroman. Esta leitura considerará a construção da identidade de jovens Afro Americanos nos romances selecionados, nomeadamente Sonny, Benji e Selina, interrogando os vários factores culturais que pautuam os seus processos de maturação.

KEYWORDS: Identity, african american, bildungsroman

ABSTRACT: Through a close reading of Claude Brown's *Manchild in The Promised Land*, Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* as examples of Bildungsroman, this dissertation aims to emphasize the fluidity of the genre by comparing the traditional Bildungsromand with the Ethnic Bildungsroman, and see how these novels challenge the traditional Bildungsroman genre by reformulating its characteristics. By analyzing characters of ethnic heritage, this work proposes a diverse reading of the social and cultural aspects of the Bildungsroman. This reading will consider the construction of identity of the children in the novels,

namely Sonny, Benji and Selina, as well as interrogating the various cultural aspects that influence their development.

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INTRODUCTION

The characteristics of a literary genre can change according to its historical and social context. The Bildungsroman novel genre is no exception. When reading a Bildungsroman, the reader is given access to another human mind, that of the protagonist, and is invited to witness and experience his/her psychophysical development. This dissertation will analyze three books in the Bildungsroman genre, all of which come under the broader category of the Ethnic Bildungsroman within African American and Caribbean literature. The aim is to emphasize the fluidity of the genre by juxtaposing the traditional Bildungsroman alongside the Ethnic Bildungsroman. By analyzing characters of ethnic heritage, this dissertation proposes a diverse reading of the social and cultural aspects of the Bildungsroman. This reading will consider the construction of identity of the children in the novels, as well as interrogate the various cultural aspects that influence their growth, specifically how developmental issues may affect their adolescence. In her book *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman (1995)*[1] Geta Leseur asks the question,

> what difference does setting have on the life of the characters? Are Black children in the United States or the West Indies constricted by society's roles? How do race, color, gender, and class affect development? Often, children try to negate their blackness since it robs them of a recognizable history and a sense of who they are, and because they are, and because they are conditioned by a society that denies them recognition as individuals. The first shock comes in childhood. They envision themselves as leaders or successful human beings, but the painful 'rites of passage' introduce them to their roles in society, and they are required to perform meaningless rituals that negate their individual freedoms. One of the tasks of the novelist, therefore, is to reduce human experience to manageable

[1] In *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman (1995)* Geta Leseur provides an illustration of how African-American authors and English-speaking West Indies have taken the European literary tradition of the Bildungsroman and adapted it to their literary needs. After defining the Bildungsroman genre, LeSeur introduces how different circumstances like race, class, gender and oppression affect the growing up process of young black adults in a different way to their white counterparts.

proportions, and one of the most effective ways to do so has been to explore the growing process by writing a novel of childhood. (10)

In order to address LeSeur's research questions I chose to focus on Bildungsromans that take place in radically different social and economic settings. By doing so, I have come to a clearer understanding of how the children in the novels convey a sense of ethnic identity that can be emblematic of their respective position in time within their particular process of coming of age. The novels I have chosen to focus on are: Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land (1965)*, Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor (2009)*, and *Brown Girl, Brownstones (1989)* by Paule Marshall. All of these novels challenge the traditional Bildungsroman genre by reformulating its characteristics.

In the foreword of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Brown explains the aim of his book as follows: "I want to talk about the first Northern urban generation of Negroes. I want to talk about the experiences of a misplaced generation, of a misplaced people in an extremely complex, confused society." (xi) Brown[2]'s autobiography was written in 1965 in the midst of the civil rights struggle in the United States. The novel tells the story of being black and being raised in a bad neighborhood but succeeding in constructing a positive identity. Although the novel is typically classified as an autobiography, I here classify it as a Bildungsroman because the novel tells the story of its narrator-protagonist Sonny, a young delinquent and problematic son, who develops into a reasonable adult once he leaves Harlem. The narrator is educated on the streets of Harlem, as well as in various reformative schools. The story is concerned with Sonny's life as a minor criminal with his peers during the 1940s and the 1950s. Throughout his journey, he is encouraged by a few guides to seek further education away from the streets, which means outside of Harlem, where he will eventually have the chance to find his real self. Indeed, the novel is also concerned with the wider Harlem community that the protagonist will later separate from, and which the narrator addresses later on in the story. The novel was published at a crucial

[2] Claude Brown (1937 – 2002) left Harlem for Greenwich Village, and later graduated in 1965 from Howard University and attended a law school. His work *Manchild in the Promised Land* is a realistic portrayal of his childhood and his struggles with street crime. He also published *Children of Ham* (1976)

political and cultural moment in the United States. In fact, that same year (1965) saw the murder of Malcolm X, the Watts riots, key events in the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War (particularly the Gulf of Tonkin incident), the issuing of the Moynihan Report, the Selma to Montgomery Civil Rights marches, the passing of the Voting Rights Act, and the founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater and School in Harlem. Moreover, both the Black Power and Black Arts Movements were in formation by 1965. Clearly, this was a period of immense social upheaval, and the transformation of the popular understanding of race in the United States helped Brown's novel gain a wide readership. It is likely that many readers during this period were interested in getting to know the reality and psychology of children living the ghetto life. At the end of the book, Brown writes how at this time Harlem was constantly changing. For Brown, the Harlem of the later years was something quite different to the one he knew at the beginning of his journey, since most of his former friends are either dead or in jail, and he is no longer in contact with the radicals he once knew.

It is clear that the Watts riots in 1965 in Los Angeles and the rebellions of 1964 in New York are representative of a widely felt desire for social change. Brown was born in 1937 and raised in Harlem, a district of Manhattan. His family was among the first black migrants who had left farms in the South for the urban North, moving up from South Carolina in 1935 and settling in a tenement in Harlem. For Brown's family, as for the many others, this migration was life-changing because it involved the pursuit of the so-called "promised land" ideal. In reference to the title of the novel, "Manchild" is a metaphor that criticizes a society that forces poor black kids, to grow up too quickly compared to their white counterparts. In his essay *Children of the Recession: Learning from Manchild in the Promised Land* from *Policy Futures in Education (2009)*, Henry A. Giroux suggests that "The hybridized concept of 'manchild' marked a space in which innocence was lost and childhood stolen. Harlem was a well-contained, internal colony and its street life provided the condition and the very necessity for insurrection." (678)

Despite the stereotype, black childhood does not necessarily have to involve poverty, cruelty, and violence. Colson Whitehead[3]'s novel, *Sag Harbor*, tells the story

[3] Colson Whitehead also wrote *The Intuitionist (1999)*, which was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award; *John Henry Days (2003)*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Awards and the Pulitzer Prize, *The Colossus of New York (2006)*, *Apex Hides the Hurt (2009)*, and most recently, *The*

of Benji, a fifteen year-old black boy from a middle/upper class family. The novel is set in 1985 and portrays Benji's life as a teenager, and how he spent his summer at Sag Harbor, which is a part of the Hamptons where many black doctors and lawyers had homes. The narrative follows Benji's summer beginning from Memorial Day through to Labor Day. Despite appearances, coming from a middle/upper-class family is not always enough to guarantee one's well-being, in fact, Benji undergoes some struggles before he begins to get to know and appreciate who he is and who he will become. The novel contains plenty of humor, and it has a completely different mood compared to those of Brown. Whitehead was born in 1969 and raised in Manhattan, New York City. He is known for being one of the most talented and innovative writers in contemporary literature. His use of language and a sarcastic and witty tone are effective ways to characterize a teenager who is gradually constructing his identity. Contrary to many African American Bildungsromans, which document the horror of being black and therefore enslaved, segregated, impoverished or imprisoned, Whitehead's novel presents class advantages and a paradise summer where life offers enough time for Benji to figure out who he is and who he wants to be. The story is a fictional autobiography of the author's life as a teenager, including teenage love and hate relationships and the beginning of pop culture events, such as the introduction of New Coke in 1985. Whitehead himself does not classify Sag Harbor as a Bildungsroman, but the novel fits the category since it follows the development of the protagonist-hero throughout his quest for identity.

Paule Marshall[4]'s debut novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) portrays women's lives within the context of Caribbean culture, particularly their struggle to succeed in the highly racialized, gendered and classist American society. It provides an

Underground Railroad (2016), for which he won the 2016 National Book Award for Fiction and the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. He has taught at Princeton University, New York University, the University of Houston, Columbia University, Brooklyn College, Hunter College, and Wesleyan University.

[4] Paule Marshall, born in 1929, is considered one of the finest twentieth-century black writers. Her parents emigrated to New York City from the Caribbean during the First World War. She graduated in 1953 from Brooklyn College. She was awarded a Ford Foundation grant and has published other works such as *Soul Clap Hands and Sing (1961)*, *Merle and Other Stories (1983)*, *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People* and *Praisesong for the Widow (1983).* She has also taught creative writing at Yale, Columbia and the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

overview of “the psychological struggles of immigrants who came from a colonized people and who, because of racial prejudice, continue to suffer some of the effects of colonization despite their new country of residence. […] the struggle of West Indies to achieve wholeness and self-realization” (LeSeur, 107). Marshall was born in Brooklyn in 1929 and it is clear that the novel draws on Marshall’s own experiences in New York. The novel begins in the 1930s, when Selina is just ten years old. Selina is the younger daughter of Barbadian immigrant parents who moved into a Brownstone house in Brooklyn, which they share with several other tenants. For Selina's family, the most important achievement is to buy their own house, this being the ultimate status symbol to demonstrate that they have made it in America. The novel is set in the period immediately following the Great Depression, when jobs were scarce, and many Barbadians were employed in domestic work. The action of the novel ends a few years after the close of the war. Knowing the historical background helps us understand the tension Selina feels, both within herself, and in her family environment. As such, she is a young girl challenging her community over its values and simultaneously searching for her own values. The novel draws heavily from Marshall’s life growing up and that of her family. Her parents had arrived from Barbados after the First World War, and it is clear that her Barbadian heritage influenced all of her work. In fact, she wrote many poems about her impressions of Barbados, and moreover, LeSeur argues that her debut novel “provide[s] a bridge between the African American and the West Indian literary traditions [because] *Brown Girl* addresses […] the problem of dual cultures, American and West Indian.” (LeSeur, 106)

What unifies the three novels in question most clearly, I think, is that each protagonist questions his or her identity, and asks the question: how do I fit in as a black person in America? The question involves a consideration of both personal and racial identity, as well as both American and African or Caribbean heritage. Sonny and Selina are raised during the Civil Rights Movement, while Benji lives in a contemporary world that is entering U.S pop culture. As such, each one grows up in an entirely different way from their family background, which has major implications for the way in which they construct their own identity. Eventually, they will find their way to their ideal self, while embracing their femininity or masculinity, as well as learning how to

be happy about who they are and who they will become as adults. These protagonists mirror their respective selves in terms of both ethnicity and gender. Because all three face the struggle of being who they are, while fighting against what the world wants them to become, the Ethnic Bildungsroman (in the context of these three novels) is endowed with exceptional significance. It is clear that there are differences between the protagonists, however. For instance, the experience of puberty for the boys (Benji and Sonny) is different than that of Selina. Furthermore, this experience plays a key role in the development of identity. There are also other differences between the protagonists beside gender, particularly in terms of how economic factors influence the construction of identity. The following chapters will examine the narrative mechanisms that categorize each novel as a Bildungsroman, as well as analyzing comparatively the identities of each of the three protagonists.

The dissertation is organized into four main chapters. The first chapter sets out the main theoretical issues related to the Bildungsroman genre, which will allow me to establish a common idiom through which these books are examined. Starting from Franco Moretti[5]'s fundamental contribution, the genre will be presented through its distinctive characteristics such as some terminological problems brought by the difficulty to translate its original German term, one of the reasons why in this thesis its German expression will be maintained. First, I will outline what is meant by the Bildungsroman in the traditional sense of a contemporary 'coming-of-age' novel that has its roots in German Romanticism. I will then focus on the Ethnic Bildungsroman, particularly how it differs from the traditional Bildungsroman.

On chapter two I will then analyze each protagonist, considering significant factors in terms of his/her evolution, including the relationship with the family and peers and how he/she conveys the ideal version of his/her identity. This chapter addresses the relationships the three children have with their respective biological parents, focusing on how influential their relationship with them can be in forming their adulthood identity. I will make a distinction between their relationships with

[5] Franco Moretti is an Italian literary critic and writer, born in 1950. He taugh English language and literature at the University of Salern and at the University of Verona. Later, he moved to the United States where he taught Comparative Literature at Columbia University and Stanford University. He now teaches at the Polytechnic Federal School of Lausanne.

their respective fathers and their mothers, in order to discover which is the more influential. I will focus on the father-son and father-daughter relationships, and then the mother-son and mother-daughter relationships. Of course, the protagonists' life choices are not solely influenced by their parents, in fact, in the case of abusive or absent parents, often other adults play a more influential role. It seems that often in such a relationship, both the child and the adult feel a sense of freedom because the adult does not have responsibility for them, and perhaps because the child felt intimidated by his/her parents and feels more able to be him or herself with people who are not family members. A sub-chapter will be dedicated to this aspect of the child's development.

Chapter three will focus on the influence of peers, particularly with regard to the negative and ambiguous effects of peer pressure.

Finally, Chapter four will consider how, after having assimilated the various experiences, teachings, and influences in the previous chapters, the protagonists succeed in different ways to discover their own true selves.

The novels have been chosen because they represent the Bildungsroman within the context of African American ethnicity. Indeed, the genre has been adopted by other African American authors as a means of rendering the dual struggle of adolescence and displaced ethnic heritage. In the case of the three novels in question, the journeys these children undergo to find their own selves is more complicated compared with that of a white child the same age. This is because the child must first accept a kind of external identity, in the sense of what they may represent from the perspectives of others, or society more widely. From this starting point, the child can then develop a positive black identity that is contrary to the stereotype.

The Ethnic Bildungsroman has roots in the broader context of African American literature. I intend to prove how the Bildungsroman, when applied to the coming-of-age narratives of racialized young people, conveys what it means to grow up with a black or mixed-race heritage in different periods of African American history.

Chapter I: Narratives of Growing Up - From the Bildungsroman to the Ethnic Bildungsroman

1.1. The Bildungsroman

> *Achilles, Hector, Ulysses: the hero of the classical epic is a mature man, an adult. Aeneas, carrying away a father by now too old, and a son still too young, is the perfect embodiment of the symbolic relevance of the 'middle' stage of life. This paradigm will last a long time ('Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita...'), but with the first enigmatic hero of modern times, it falls apart. According to the text, Hamlet is thirty years old: far from young by Renaissance standards. But our culture, in choosing Hamlet as its first symbolic hero, has 'forgotten' his age, or rather has had to alter it, and picture the Prince of Denmark as a young man. The decisive thrust in this sense was made by Goethe; and it takes shape, symptomatically, precisely in the work that codifies the new paradigm and sees youth as the most meaningful part of life: Wilhelm Meister. [...] Youth is both a necessary and sufficient definition of these heroes (Moretti, 4).*

As a literary tradition, the Bildungsroman has its roots in Germany in the eighteenth century. It is not a genre with exact boundaries that isolate it from other literary genres, thus, it is necessary to first consider the etymology of the term. It is commonly translated into English from German as “novel of formation”, but there is a subtle difference between the two expressions. “Formation” in German is “Bildung”, and novel of formation is “Bildungsroman”. However, “Bildung” also implies giving shape, or modeling in the sense that “das Bild” refers to image, painting, portrait and photography, while “der Bildner” is the creator of images, statues and paintings. The

term “del Bildhauer” is the sculptor, while “Bildung” can be the construction, as well as the act of building, forming, and shaping character (as in “der Charakter bilden”), or even the cultivating of the spirit (“den Geist bilden”). The term Bildungsroman is, then, much richer in meaning than its translation suggests, since it refers to “both the external form of appearance of an individual […] and to the process of giving form.” (Kontje, 2) Consequently, it is appropriate to search for corresponding terminology in English. The philological analysis of the term permits us to comprehend the Bildungsroman as the training and formation of the intellectual capabilities of the individual. The term was coined by the German scholar Karl Morgenstern.[6] In 1819 Morgenstern defined the Bildungsroman as follows:

> We may call a novel a Bildungsroman first and foremost on account of its content, because it represents the development of the hero in its beginning and progress to a certain stage of completion, but also, second, because this depiction promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any other kind of novel. The objective and work-encompassing goal of any poet who produces such a novel will be the pleasurable, beautiful, and entertaining depiction of the formative history of a protagonist who is especially suited to such a development; this goal will be original and, as every truly beautiful artwork, free of any didacticism. […] The novelist will wisely aim to unite the purpose of art, which is to please and to entertain by means of the beautiful, with the strictly human purpose to serve, to instruct, and to better – in a word, to *form [bilden]*. (654-5)

Morgenstern was perhaps the first to understand that the genre involved a kind of education, whereby the reader and the protagonist simultaneously envisage the inner evolution of the author.

> It will justly bear the name *Bildungsroman* firstly and primarily on account of its thematic material, because it portrays the *Bildung* of the hero in its beginnings and growth to a certain stage of completeness; and also secondly because it is by

[6] Karl Morgenstern (1770-1852) was a professor of aesthetics at the University of Dorpat. He had been considered by many scholars, philologists, and philosophers as the first scholar to use the term Bildungsroman in a public lecture, *On the Nature of the Bildungsroman (Über das Wesen des Bildungsromans)* in 1819. In 1824 he published another work titled *The History of the Bildungsroman* (*Zur Geschichte des Bildungsroman)*, in which he analyzes the Bildungsroman literary genre and its historic origins.

> virtue of this portrayal that it furthers the reader's *Bildung* to a much greater extent than any other kind of novel. (Swales, 12)

The Bildungsroman, then, involves a central character who is in the process of maturation and whose life circumstances, including his interaction with other characters, guide him to a mental state that is superior to or different from that of the beginning. Another possible definition delimits the genre as the narration of the biographical events of a hero who, through heterogeneous experiences, achieves the goal of giving an organized, rational and complete form to his individuality. It can also be considered as a real or metaphorical journey, an observation that is made by Marc Redfield in his book *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the "Bildungsroman" (1996)*:

> For since the Bildungsroman narrates the acculturation of a self – the integration of a particular 'I' into the general subjectivity of a community, and thus, finally, into the universal subjectivity of humanity – the genre can be said to repeat, as its identity or content, its own synthesis of a particular instance and general form. (38)

Nevertheless, it is difficult to find a definition of the Bildungsroman that is accepted univocally since it shares characteristics with other genres. In an attempt to define it, scholars and intellectuals have conducted debates, written theses and developed hypotheses.

One of the most notable exemplars of the Bildungsroman is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-1796) represents the prototype for the genre together with *The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774).*[7] The intricate plot of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* can be summarized as follows: it is concerned with the commemoration of the early years of the protagonist Wilhelm, who is conflicted between his bourgeois duty, which relates to the commercial activity of his father, and his own aspirations as a poet and playwright. At the beginning of the story

[7] *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) is considered a singular example of the Bildungsroman. The protagonist devolves, however, instead of evolving. His alienation from the world dominates him and he eventually commits suicide. The novel is written in the form of an epistolary and Werther's letters give the reader access to Werther's downfall, as well as his intellectual development, in a diachronic manner.

the young man falls in love with an actress, but, feeling betrayed by her, leaves for a journey that is full of meetings and vicissitudes. At the denouement, Wilhelm is chosen by a secret society that has maneuvered all his actions up until this point. The confirmation of what comes from the report of his wanderings and a letter containing the future rules of conduct. The marriage puts an end to his apprenticeship, and the hero will understand how the achievement of maturity is a path of approach to others. Franco Moretti argues that underlines:

> [e]ven though the concept of the Bildungsroman has become ever more approximate, it is still clear that we seek to indicate with it one of the most harmonious solutions ever offered to a dilemma conterminous with modern bourgeois civilization: the conflict between the ideal of self determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization. (15)[8]

Goethe creates a universe not yet shaken by the ideals of the French Revolution and makes possible a synthesis between the individual in and for himself, and his social integration as part of a whole. Wilhelm's development takes place according to a diachronic timeline that sees the past and the present interpenetrate in a perspective of randomness. That said, there is also a horizontal timeline in the sense that Wilhelm's private perspective converges into the public one, allowing the individual to become part of a synchronic community. Moretti argues that "the comfort of civilization" is the only way to reach maturity and describes in detail the connections that make it possible. narrative proofs, which inaugurate the genre as the first in chronological order, follow the so-called "classification principle" based on the search for a marked end that could establish a different classification with respect to the initial situation of the story but at the same time definitive and harmonious, because what matters is the search for a teleology of history that is embodied in marriage, a social contract able to establish the pact between individual and world in a happy acceptance of the duty. In the Bildungsroman, it is necessary to create a malleable protagonist who possesses a multifaceted and heterogeneous personality, and who manages to achieve a significant level of maturity. The narrator, who can be a third person, or the protagonist from a retrospective perspective, is omniscient in the

[8] Almost thirty years after its publication, Franco Moretti's essay *The Way of the World* (1987) is still an excellent starting point for those interested in the Bildungsroman genre.

sense that s/he has an overview of the events and already knows the complete story, and as such legitimizes the story, which otherwise would not have a reason to exist.

After its beginnings in Germany, the Bildungsroman was developed primarily in England at the end of the Nineteenth Century, at a time when European culture was undergoing its own kind of formation.[9] In fact, during the Eighteenth Century, European culture was not considered one of modernity, and the arrival of the Bildungsroman coincided with, and in some represented the birth of a new Europe. At this time, European society was undergoing radical changes with regard to industrialization and urbanization. There was a significant movement of people from the countryside to the cities that was driven by the search for employment. Young people found themselves facing a new capitalistic world that made the continuity between generations uncertain. What's more, the individual experienced the disappearance of those who had for centuries been referral points, finding themselves in a position to search for their own self. At this time, young people represented the most appealing protagonists since they were the ones who tended to explore what was for them a new contemporary era, marked by mobility, inferiority, dissatisfaction, and restlessness. The search for the self and the experience of new technologies provoked profound societal transformations. Society is inherently inclined to travel, explore and conquer, while seeking to increase its knowledge and business capacity. In light of this, youth is seen as a symbolic form of modernity. With regard to the Bildungsroman, its protagonists are mirrors of the historical period in which they live. Moretti argues that

> [i]n this first respect youth is 'chosen' as the new epoch's 'specific material sign', and it is chosen over the multitude of other possible signs, because of its ability to accentuate modernity's dynamism and instability. Youth is, so to speak, modernity's 'essence', the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past. And, to be sure, it was impossible to cope with the times

[9] The most famous examples of coming-of-age novels in English literature are *The Histoy of Tom Jones, a Foundling (1749)* by Henry Fielding, *David Copperfield (1850)* by Charles Dickens, *A Portraits of the Artist as a Young Man (1916)* by James Joyce, and last but not least *Pride and Prejudice (1813)* by Jane Austen. While the hero of the German Bildungsroman such as Goethe's Wilhelm Meisters is more idialistic, aiming for perfection n everything, the hero of the English Bildungsroman is usually more influenced by the capitlistic ideology, therefore he wants to better himself/herself.

> without acknowledging their revolutionary impetus: a symbolic form incapable of doing so would have been perfectly useless. (5)

Moretti considers youth as a symbol of change, which is associated with the future rather than the past. Youth is seen as a transitory stage where the end weakens the real meaning of the stage of childhood in life. In relation to this idea, Moretti distinguishes between two principles that are found in the novel, the “classification principle” and the “transformation principle”. The classification principle implies that the events in the novel acquire meaning only after the protagonist’s maturation, which demonstrates how “youth is subordinated to the idea of maturity” (7). By contrast, the “transformation principle” has to do with the fact that “youth cannot or does not want to give way to maturity: the young hero senses in fact such a 'conclusion' a sort of betrayal, which would deprive his youth of its meaning rather than enrich it” (8). As such, the young hero of the Bildungsroman always reflects a contemporary concept of youth.

Following the establishment of a new kind of Europe, the most important factor of the post-feudal society is the birth of the bourgeoisie, which in fact constituted the bulk of readers of the Bildungsroman. Since the genre addressed this new social class, it was obvious that the protagonist should also come from the bourgeoisie. As such, the protagonist’s social and geographical mobility is made possible. In the modern Bildungsroman there is a clear departure from theology that places the individual at the center of attention with all his attributes and possibilities. The most significant aspect of this new individuality is the possibility of moving geographically and vertically within society. What is more, the relationship between the stages of youth and maturity of the hero is linked to the chronological dimension of the Bildungsroman.

To a large extent, critical studies of the Bildungsroman focus chiefly on the aspect of formation (“Bildun” in German), while the novel's peculiarities are quickly dismissed. Following the cessation of feudal society, which was marked by political revolution in France and industrial revolution elsewhere in Europe, a new, more dynamic and enlightened ruling class came to control the cultural landscape, which was conceived in its image and according to its tastes. Responding to the needs of this new capitalist world, which was dominated by a new ethical code of money and

fashion, unique characteristics of social mobility and enterprise animated the people. Such a radical reorganization of society was responsible for a kind of rupture in terms of the inheritance of professions, whereby an individual had the opportunity to make his/her own destiny in a way that was impossible before, and thus, engendering a previously unknown freedom that favored a more complex and restless introspection.

During the Nineteenth Century, many novels were considered as Bildungsromans, which eventually led to the obfuscation of the genre in terms of the traditional Bildungsroman concept. The thematic dispersion of the genre led to it being included in other literary genres, such as the historical novel, the autobiographic novel, the educational-pedagogical novel, the epistolary novel and the costume novel (Moretti, 10). Traditionally, the Bildungsroman consists of a story about the life development of a single protagonist who is at a critical stage in his/her maturation from childhood to adulthood. As well as the passage from youth to adulthood, the genre is also thematically concerned with the intellectual and moral development of the protagonist. Moretti argues that

> as a rule, the classical Bildungsroman has the reader perceive the text through the eyes of the protagonist: which is logical, since the protagonist is undergoing the experience of formation, and the reading too is intended to be a formative process. The reader's vision hunger then on that of the protagonist: he identifies with the hero, sharing the partiality and individuality of his reactions. (56)

The Bildungsroman also includes some sub-categories. In the Entwicklungsroman (the novel of evolution), the protagonist, facing conflicts both in himself and in society, undergoes a process of psycho-physical improvement.[10] The reader follows the maturation of the protagonist, a process whereby the protagonist overcomes various difficulties. The Erziehungsroman (the novel of education) is a sub-category of both the Bildungsroman and the Entwicklungsroman (Moretti, 17).[11]

[10] Examples of the Entwicklungsroman are *Parzival (1200-1210)* by Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch (1669)* by Hans Jakob Grimmelshausen, *Geschichte Des Agathon: Erster Theil (1766)* by Martin Wieland.

[11] *Emile or on Education (1762)* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau represents a famous example of Erziehungsroman. From its first pages is analyzed the contrast between the man's education and the education of the citizen. Rousseau's theory aims at shaping the individual through three kinds of education: nature education, education of things, men's education; only when there is harmony

Erziehungsroman novels focus primarily on a pedagogical process through which the protagonist grows up while simultaneously narrating this process. The word Erziehen is a German word that means “education”. It is important here to underline the difference between the terms education and formation. Education is “the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life.” (education, n.d.) As such, the important role played by another person emerges in a systematic or approximately designed way. This happens in most cases in a classroom or a simulated environment. It is clear that whether in a school or in a laboratory, the accompaniment of a teacher or an educator, who can also be a relative, is indispensable in the education process. All the activity is carried out with the explicit purpose of bettering the protagonist in such a way that his condition will improve. By contrast, formation is the “process aimed at the psycho-physical and intellectual development of one person or aimed at civil, spiritual and moral education, or specific preparation and training.” (formation, n.d.) Therefore, formation is a process that does not necessarily require the presence of another person. It can be the result of events, experiences or circumstances from the protagonist's life. It is a natural process through which a person develops according to his actions, experiences, and the ways in which s/he absorbs teachings. In this way, formation means to give form to an action, to reach conclusions in order to understand, and then to take intelligent advantage of experiences. Formation is therefore synonymous with the maturation process. As such, it is more likely that the protagonist is of a younger age, since it is then possible to render the development while making it more explicit. It is clear then that the Bildungsroman overlaps with other genres, of which the Entwicklungsroman and the Erziehungroman are limited variants. Furthermore, in some cases, the Erziehungroman is the result of the process of change in relation to the protagonist, an aspect which is implicit in the Bildungsroman since it is not made obvious to the reader whether or not the protagonist reaches a higher emotional state. The genre is, therefore, difficult to define, not because it differs from other genres, but because its distinctive elements are more malleable. It is possible to define

between these kind of education one can be considered as "well educated."

all novels in which the protagonist undergoes a mental or psycho-physical development as Bildungsromans.

Moreover, one must consider the ways in which the hero of the Bildungsroman is the same or different from that of other novelistic genres. The temporal dimension is fundamental in the Bildungsroman since it follows the life of the protagonist in a diachronic way. The Bildungsroman is also a realistic literary genre that requires a historically determined setting. As Moretti states

> realistic narrative does not tolerate happy endings: these portray the harmony of values and events, while the new image of reality is based on their division. There must be no justice in this world: a realistic story must be meaningless, 'signifying nothing'. Even though it comes at the end, the unhappy ending proves here to be the rhetoric-ideological foundation of nineteenth-century realism: narrative verisimilitude itself is initially sacrificed by the compelling need of these novels to finish unhappily. (120)

Clearly, the Bildungsroman exemplifies an indifference towards the state and politics since the characters think and act in their daily lives in the context of civil society, which is a suitable terrain for creating spontaneous ties. The individual is interested in the construction of his/her own world in the harmonious setting of the domestic. However, it is clear that the genre did evolve within a few years of the French Revolution and the tremendous political transformations that it inaugurated. The original Bildungsroman offers the reader an idyllic ending where the young protagonist is assimilated into bourgeois society. Moretti argues that the price for this assimilation is the renunciation of freedom: the protagonist feels successful only within the protective walls of the community, in an insular environment that is regulated by coercive rules. However, following the French Revolution this characteristic of the genre significantly changed. As Moretti remarks

> picking up *The Red and the Black* after finishing Wilhelm Meister, one is struck by how much the structure of the Bildungsroman has changed in little more than thirty years. The 'great world' can no longer be confined to the story's periphery, in hazy revolutions and bloodless wars, but assaults the 'little world', actively forging the inferiority of its new heroes. These are no longer sound and pliant, but

> passionate and unmanageable, 'dark and strange': they will never become 'mature' in the ways suggested by the classical Bildungsroman. Formation as a synthesis of variety and harmony; the homogeneity of individual autonomy and socialization; the very notion of the novel as a 'symbolic' and organic form – all these beliefs are now dismissed as so many fairy-tale illusions. (75)

Another key factor of the genre that changed during this period relates to the numerous experiences of the protagonist, which are commonly negative ones. At this point, the protagonist is given time to reflect in order to reconsider his/her goals and dreams, as well as evaluating the mistakes he made. As such, he has the opportunity to modify and correct his targets, or to return to a previous point in his journey to change the direction of his personal development. For the first time in the story, the protagonist re-evaluates his/her childhood and adolescence, which are conceived of as rich and diverse sources of support with respect to adulthood. At this point, it becomes clear that the protagonist, as a young person, has what it takes to decipher and dominate the present, better than any other characters in the story. This is because s/he possesses an essential dynamism and an ability to interpret his/her reality according to reason, and therefore progressing from an earlier state of innocence. As Moretti suggests, "[y]outh, or rather the European novel's numerous versions of youth, becomes for our modern culture the age which holds the 'meaning of life' it is the first gift Mephisto offers Faust." (4) What is more,

> when we remember that the Bildungsroman – the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization – is also the most contradictory of modern symbolic forms, we realize that in our world socialization itself consists first of all in the interiorization of contradiction. The next step being not to 'solve' the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a toll for survival. (Moretti, 10)

Moretti also suggests that the Bildungsroman tends to be contradictory, since modern socialization is a process of "the interiorization of certain contradictions, like that between freedom and happiness or between identity and change. The project of modern subjects as well as of the bildungsroman is then 'not to solve the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it". (Hay, 318) This contradiction is

evident in the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the demands of socialization. In his essay *Nervous Conditions, Lukács, and the Postcolonial Bildungsroman (2013)*, Simon Hay argues that

> [f]or a novel of formation to make sense, its protagonist needs to have both the desire and the opportunity to become something new. If we follow this history, then the early 20th century saw the end of the genre, as individuals became increasingly alienated from the societies that ought to have confirmed the kinds of subjectivity and self-worth that the Bildungsroman celebrates. […] But in actual fact the genre survived and even flourished through the twentieth century in, for instance, European women's writing and in the national literatures of the newly minted countries that emerged from various European empires. (318)

Between the turbulent political period from 1789 to 1815 the genre underwent a substantial change in that the impossibility to synthesize the external world with the inner world became evident. As such, the traditional Bildungsroman was influenced by the "transformation principle" that we find in the epics of Stendhal, in which the protagonist is portrayed as and the other authors at the turn of the two centuries were ordered according to the "transformation principle" that gives us a contradictory youth who is more dynamic and rebellious, and less disposed to compromise with society than the protagonist of earlier novels. As such, the protagonist is unable to reach adult maturity and repudiates both the marriage and teleology of history.[12] We find this new kind of protagonist in Julien Sorel in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black (1830)*. The novel is set during the Restoration in France in a society that has abandoned the ideals of the past. Julien is a problematic character, an ambitious social climber who does not integrate into society and eventually suffers a tragic death. He is deeply immersed in the politics of his time, and the domestic sphere that was cherished by Goethe is set aside in favor of an external existential search.

If the critical debate concerning the Bildungsroman and the temporal and geographical limits of its applicability in the context of Western literature is problematic, it is more so in the Postcolonial context. The central problem being that it is unclear whether or not critical definitions can be applied to Postcolonial literature,

[12] Another Bildungsroman by Stendhal, together with *The Red and the Black (1830)*, is *The Charterhouse of Parma (1839)*.

since these definitions have been elaborated from the analysis of Western texts, and the use of such definitions risks perpetuating cultural imperialism.

From the Eighteenth Century to the present day the Bildungsroman as one of the main literary genres has undergone several significant changes. It has been and continues to be an important cultural category since it offers the main motivations by which society is formed, deformed or changed.

1.2 The Ethnic Bildungsroman

In the traditional Bildungsroman the protagonist's aim is social integration. In later manifestations, there is greater focus on recounting his/her emotions, projects and actions. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the genre became more centered around the individual and his/her relationship with him or herself, instead of focusing solely on his opposition to and later integration within society. Protagonists still analyze their social background, and their social objectives still influence decisions and actions. What's more, it remains the case that their coming-of-age is explicitly brought into being through their understanding of their place in history. (Millard, 11) By analysing the development from childhood to adulthood, researchers can explore personal identity and selfhood, as well as on a symbolic level in terms of national identity. What's more, children who have both positive and negative memories associated with their cultural lifestyles have the opportunity to express themselves through the voices of their authors, recounting both painful and joyful experiences while looking for a unique identity and exploring the world behind their communities. (LeSeur, 11)

In his book *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (2007) Kenneth Millard describes the contemporary novel of adolescence as "often characterized by a concerted attempt to situate the protagonist in relation to historical contexts or points of origin by which individuals come to understand themselves as having been conditioned."(10) What's more, the process of coming-of-age occurs simultaneously in relation to and is deeply influenced by historical events. Millard argues that the struggle between "self-fashioning" and what he calls "historical determination"

generates a tension between “the autonomy of the individual and the shaping pressure of history that the political ideology of each novel lies.” (ibid.)

Having described the origins and characteristics of the traditional Bildungsroman, it is important to illustrate how it differs from the Ethnic Bildungsroman. The traditional Bildungsroman focuses on the development of a male protagonist who is eventually assimilated into the dominant society in which he already lives. In the Ethnic Bildungsroman there are often a mixture of themes, including racial identity, strong political opinions, the search for a meaning in life, immigration, the search for one’s identity, as well as other issues relating to postcolonialism and how to reach one's self through alternative fields (as is the case with the Kunstlerroman). In his book *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction (2005)* Martin Japtok argues that the Bildungsroman is well suited to explain the meaning of ethnicity since it focuses on the protagonist’s interactions with the wider environment. Japtok also affirms that both the autobiography and the Bildungsroman provide answers about how conceptualizations of ethnicity influence a genre, because when in the hands of ethnic authors, it is common for these two literary genres to thematize ethnicity and to show how their authors conceptualize it. (21-2) By contrast, the primary purpose of the Ethnic Bildungsroman's is to classify the formation of ethnic identity, which is the result of negotiations made between the protagonist and the dominant society: "ethnic nationalism is channeled and refracted through the Bildungsroman genre" (Japtok, 11). What’s more, Japtok argues that

> [the] Ethnic Bildungsroman and autobiography attest to the fact that Western societies, should they ever have meant to make Bildung, reason, and consistency possible for all its members, have not succeeded. The protagonists of ethnic coming-of-age stories strive for their Bildung, they work on shaping their personalities, and often their social environment offers more hindrance than support, so that reaching harmony within a more or less hostile social order might be a tenuous proposition at best. [...] Ethnic Bildungsroman thus complicate the vision of what it may mean to adjust to an environment simply because the potential options have multiplied. (28)

In the traditional Bildungsroman, the assimilation to the dominant society implies that the protagonist theoretically conforms to social expectation through acceptance and understanding of his place in society, following a period of education and feelings of dislocation. Moreover, in the Ethnic Bildungsroman it is possible that the protagonist could fail in the assimilation process that is required by the dominant culture, and therefore continue to carry out his/her quest for cultural maintenance and the formation of an ethnic identity (either his/her own or that of his/her children). In *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (2015) Gregory Castle describes the complexities and contradictions inherent in the failure of the modernist Bildungsroman. Here, the protagonist fails to achieve harmonious socialization and the genre exploits the power of failure as a weapon to rehabilitate the Bildungsroman genre. (2) Furthermore, Castle argues that

> the modernist Bildungsroman harbors a powerful sense of frustration with the dialectical structure of classical Bildung, so evident in the work of Enlightenment thinkers like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Wilhelm von Humboldt. This frustration finds expression in a form of 'negative' critique, […] What we perceive to be the failures of Bildung in modernist Bildungsroman can thus be read as critical triumphs. […] What changes is a new questioning of the ideological subtexts concerning the nature and function of the subject and a new concern for the structure and goal of self-cultivation. (3)

By analyzing the three novels that were mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation aims to determine what constitutes an ethnic Bildungsroman, and how this differs from the traditional version. First, it is necessary to emphasize that the protagonist in an Ethnic Bildungsroman differs from that of a traditional Bildungsroman because s/he is from an ethnic background, and will therefore face challenges that a non-ethnic protagonist would not, for example, problems relating to double cultural identity, stereotypes, racism, and being loyal to the ethnic community. Often, these protagonists are successful and return to their original communities to inspire others. Typically, the main obstacle to development does not lie in the protagonist but in the society, which is another key difference between the two types of Bildungsroman. Often, the obstacle manifests itself in the form of racism and

stereotypes. In the traditional Bildungsroman, the protagonist has faith in the dominant society even while challenging it. By contrast, in the Ethnic Bildungsroman the protagonist has to face obstacles within the society as well as stereotypes. Furthermore, the protagonist wants to preserve his/her ethnic identity and does not want to lose those unique characteristics with which s/he identifies, while at the same time, s/he wants to be part of a society that is different from him. For the protagonist of the Ethnic Bildungsroman, the community is always a burden. That said, the aim is not to leave his community, but to succeed in adapting himself to be part of the dominant society, while obtaining acceptance from himself and from the community as a whole. Lima argues that

> the individual's desires dovetail perfectly with what society desires of her or him so that the individual's highest aspiration is to be socialized. [...] In the European Bildungsroman the emphasis remains on an individuality that has to be renounced. In the classic version of the genre this happens willingly; in later Bildungsroman the renunciation is coded as a disappointing but necessary resignation of an individuality that is both one of the greatest promises of capitalist modernity and one of the most powerful sources of its legitimacy. [...] Here, colonialism has not attempted to integrate individuals into their respective communities; rather it has striven to alienate individuals from their communities through forces assimilation and the fracturing of those communities by dismantling tribal structures. (299)

The overlapping between the Bildungsroman and the autobiography has influenced the Caribbean sub-genre, or as it has been called, the "black Bildungsroman". Geta LeSeur establishes a genealogical relationship between the black Bildungsroman and slave narratives. Throughout its development, the black Bildungsroman has maintained a relationship not only with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and the Nineteenth Century English models in the scholastic program of the colonial educational system and in the local libraries, but also with the oral storytelling tradition of African American writers and with the modern Bildungsroman. To map the Caribbean Bildungsroman, an anti-teleological, rhizomatic model is needed. This model uses the principle of "relation" that Glissant places at the

center of his poetics to contrast “the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root.” (14) Martin Japtok argues that

> both traditional Bildungsroman and autobiography heavily emphasize the protagonist and his/her development, and thus individualism, their ethnic equivalents seem to give more room to others. While autobiography and Bildungsroman allow for an assertion of individuality, the very fact that the denial of one's individuality by the mainstream stems from the latter's view of one' ethnic group necessitates a dual strategy on the part of ethnic authors. The literary creation of the ethnic individual must go hand in hand with a vision of ethnicity which counters the mainstream's stereotypes, unless the work is to claim exceptionalism on the part of its protagonist while, partly or wholly, subscribing to the mainstream, view of ethnicity. [...] The difference between the mainstream and ethnic versions of autobiography and Bildungsroman is, of course, not absolute, but one of degree. The traditional forms predominantly stress the individual but may also acknowledge a community; ethnic texts feature community involvement more prominently, but they also stress individual development, so that communalism and individualism exist side by side. (25-26)

The Caribbean writers who emigrated to the UK in the 1950s, for example appropriated the Bildungsroman by making it an instrument of criticism of colonialism and historiographical revision through the strategic use of marginal points of view. Often by incorporating autobiographical elements, the Bildungsroman became a privileged place for reflection on identity research during the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial period that began following the end of the Second World War. While the traditional Bildungsroman combines the hope that the subject and the community can form a whole, in the postcolonial Bildungsroman a re-examination of the relationship between the individual and the nation takes place, which reinforces the fact that the postcolonial Bildungsroman does not emphasize the harmonious reconciliation of the protagonist with society as the traditional Bildungsroman does. Instead, it expresses the numerous forces that inhibit the protagonist from achieving personal realization in a postcolonial space. These forces include exile or dislocation,

problems with trans-cultural interaction, poverty, and the difficulties of preserving personal, family, and cultural memories.

The fundamental problem in many postcolonial Bildungsromans is the socialization of young people, whereby there is a clash between individual freedom and social norms. In the Nineteenth Century England underwent several radical transformations, including reforms, discoveries and innovations, social unrest and intense debates on the social position of women. Formerly, women were not protagonists in Bildungsromans, and even though some female characters do appear, their relationship with the protagonist is minor. Moreover, women were not considered as suitable protagonists because of a perceived lack of freedom that would hinder self-development. The social condition of women at this time prevented them from experiencing the necessary maturation process. At this time in fact, not only women were easily subject to the Bildungsroman, but they were also aware of it.

The female Bildungsroman is in some ways a contradiction, because novels on the transition from girlhood to womanhood historically had a plot that ended in a negative note. The heroines had to learn to conform to gender norms rather than discovering themselves as individuals. Despite compelling plots, the girls often ended up accepting undesirable marriages and not fulfilling their dreams. There are key differences between men and women in terms of their development. In both the traditional Bildungsroman and the one with a female protagonist, the growth process involves similar emotions and the lessons learnt are also similar. However, in the case of a Bildungsroman in which the female character is already grown-up and married with children, whereby her development is motivated by a feeling of frustration with her current life, a distinction can be made since a man can leave his home to seek an independent life more easily than a woman. Paradoxically, it benefits the man emotionally and morally, while it would be subject to condamnation for a woman. Finally, when the human hero reaches the end of his spiritual and psychological journey as a mature man, until then he has resolved himself by settling down to the world, or alternatives to rebel. The female does not have the same choices, her only option is to focus on her inner world rather than marrying society. Another difference

is that man begins to climb the social ladder, while the woman rebels against society and injustices.

The correlation between the growth of the protagonist and the formation of the postcolonial state raises some interesting questions, particularly because many novels written in the 1950's, a period of separatist nationalist fervor, end with the migration of the young protagonist to England or the United States, and therefore deny in allegorical terms the possibility of an independent state. However, an allegorical reading of the text can be overly simplistic and contradictory. Indeed, the production of Bildungsroman in the period both before and after the independence obtained in 1962 requires a reflection on the relationship between the search for identity that the Bildungsroman embodies and the "collective quest for identity" that accompanies the process of political autonomy. (Glissant, 113)

The analysis of the corpus texts emphasized that the genre was appropriated by the Caribbean writers to represent the hopes and anxieties of a significant historical transition. In the Bildungsromans of the 1950's and 60's written by diasporic authors and set in the Caribbean, the figure of the child or adolescent prevails, which draws a comparison with the Bildungsroman of Nineteenth-Century England. (Moretti, 204) While the traditional Bildungsroman focuses on a young man who symbolically reflects the dynamism of a changing society, the later British examples focus on innocent children, and suggest a devaluation of the growth process that emphasizes the loss rather than the development of the child's capacities. The prevalence of children or adolescent narrators in the novels set in the Caribbean can be traced back to Victorian models, what's more, the perspectives they employ, besides being an instrument of the unveiling, allude to the marginal position, not only of the individual but also in terms of the symbolic colonial condition. Stories about childhood, which are a popular variant in the Caribbean context of the training novel, are inherently limited to the re-enactment of childhood years. Moreover, the limited perception of the narrator often gives rise to unstable and unfinished mosaics that formally restore the fragmentary nature of the subject, while emphasizing the provisional and partial quality of his/her knowledge. Japtok argues that

> [p]rotagonist-centered writing thus serves as a communication medium for ethnic writers: on the one hand, they share life experiences with other members of the writer's ethnic community; on the other hand, they communicate 'authentic' views of ethnic life to mainstream readers. [...] At the same time, they are, to a greater or lesser degree, beholden to essentialist conceptualizations of ethnicity, and thus they cannot avoid creating new stereotypes, which are sometimes old stereotypes with new valorizations. (25)

There is an intimate relationship between coming-of-age novels and their colonial counterparts. The novels written in the 1950's and 60's use a child or adolescent narrator, or adopt his/her point of view, and thus transform childhood into a symbolic series of illusions, a condition of vulnerability in which the narrator is subjected to ideological manipulations, an exit from which leads to a profound transformation and to the growth of awareness. Often in the colonial Bildungsroman, this crucial passage is incomplete or postponed. In the Caribbean-based training novel, the perspective of the child or adolescent narrator is of crucial importance. The genesis of the Bildungsroman's auto-biographical style of narration often involves a child who is curious to retrace his/her family history in search of his/her origins. Since the Bildungsroman is written in the first person, it is linked to the autobiographical memory of the protagonist-narrator, however, these memories often conflict with the reconstruction of those fundamental missing parts that remain inaccessible. According to Moretti, the “classic” Bildungsroman is configured as a genre based on the formation and voluntary adhesion of the subject to the social rules shared after the period of youth that is considered “revolutionary” but is destined to end. (3-15)

The way in which a Bildungsroman concludes is particularly significant. According to Moretti, examples like *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, in which there is a happy ending, the plot is transformed from a mere chronological succession of events into an intentional path in which the end of the story and the end of the protagonist’s development, as a rule, coincide to perfection. (131) Thus, the Nineteenth Century realistic novel has an anti-teleological character since it presents itself merely as what happened. (Moretti, 135) Moreover, the traditional Bildungsroman offers hope in the sense of a final reintegration between

the individual and the community. By contrast, there is often a clear difference in tone when considering the Ethnic Bildungsroman. As LeSeur suggests,

> the African American bildungsroman do not seem to celebrate life as much. One feels sadness and sorrow for the characters. It almost seems a tragedy to have been born in the first place [...] The setting and American lifestyle do not permit childhood to linger, as the child very quickly experiences a loss of innocence. (3-5)

Often at the conclusion of the Ethnic Bildungsroman the protagonist reconciles with his/her former society, an aspect that does not occur in the traditional Bildungsroman. On the contrary, often many reasons prevent the protagonist from succeeding, such as exile, dislocation, poverty, and the difficulties of preserving personal, familial, and cultural memories. The Ethnic Bildungsroman usually describes "the protagonist entering puberty as well as relocating to a metropolitan sphere for work or further education, leaving home for a new growing experience different from the early or first one." (LeSeur, ibid.) The first half of the Twentieth Century sees in African American coming-of-age Bildungsroman the emergence of stories that describe growing up outside of the context of institutionalized slavery. (Japtok, 8) LeSeur argues that

> [t]he African American's increased awareness of self has heightened his perception of indifference and antipathy to his blackness. The black boy who discovers himself discovers that he is isolated in an alien society, where the journey to manhood is painful and will continue to be so, as long as he resides in a racially charged society. (100)

LeSeur suggests that the formation of the self in the black child presents a major problem because of the significant influence of racial oppression. In the slave narrative tradition, as well as in autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century, black self-hatred, negative self-image, and rejection by white role models, were common themes. Furthermore, it is common for black children to grow up in a society that emphasizes a distinction between white and black and for black children to live with a feeling of inferiority, since they perceive themselves as not part of the privileged group. (LeSeur, 30) In African American literature, the Bildungsroman has no prototype equivalent to that of white European writers, on the contrary, it tends to be

autobiographical, and the hero is often a gifted or sensitive male. The black hero usually rejects the constraints of home life instead opting for a journey elsewhere that is guided by different worldviews. As LeSeur clarifies, “[t]he protagonists in these stories meet with many setbacks before choosing a proper philosophy, mate, and vocation." (18) What’s more, African American writers chose to expose everything that played a significant role for them in not having a normal, memorable and happy childhood, and which resulted in them being "exiles in their own country." (LeSeur, 27)

> The Bildungsroman's idea of successful adulthood is imperialist, colonial, and patriarchal and such requires that colonized people, especially women, remain precisely objects and not subjects – strange semihumans in opposition to whom a modernized, adult self can emerge. If this is so, then the bildungsroman would, from an anti-imperialist perspective, need to be discarded, so that writers could work out for themselves entirely different modes of narrating and describing what 'coming-of-age' is to mean, no longer embedded in European models. (Hay, 322)

A Bildungsroman with a black female for a protagonist provides greater insight into the formation of racial and personal identity when compared with a traditional one. Growing up in a marginalized environment shapes them differently than their white counterparts. Normally, the young white male must make choices that focus on his education, marriage, and material future, whereas the young black female protagonist is faced with how she is going to achieve self—acceptance while facing problems relating to the colonization of her body, mind, and soul, particularly in terms of patriarchal prejudice and discrimination, racism, and economic hardship. The quest for a black female is not about discovering her ego, being satisfied in a chosen career, or securing wealth or fame, it is concerned with reconstructing the valuable fragments of her personal and racial identity from a girlhood that was destroyed by racism and sexism. By doing so, the black female hopes to survive in society. What’s more, many female characters, while being in a similar situation to their white counterparts, are often seen as “victims, sex objects, mother haters, little mammies, and rebellious outsiders.” (LeSeur, 102) As a consequence, they seek for a new and distinct existence from one predetermined by history and culture. Black women writers tend to depict the black woman's internal struggle to explain the complexities of "racial identity,

gender definition, and the awakening of their sexual being." (LeSeur, ibid.) Their intent is to discover and re-create the self in the middle of a hostile racial context. LeSeur argues that

> Black novels of childhood, although having some of the characteristics of the European or White bildungsroman, cannot be grouped with any of these novels. They are very distinct in their content and presentation because of a different set of sociological and historical contexts. If only because of the facts of Black history alone, the trappings of class and color, and general circumstances of home, family, and community, Black children have not flourished like White children. With Emancipation, in the United States and the Caribbean, the newly independent nations, and the African nations' revolutions of the 1960s, a new kind of literature had to be written as an affirmation for those emancipations. (21)

According to LeSeur, children's perceptions are representative of their communities and their people, not only because of their honesty but also because they are often "the forgotten camera in the corner." (10) Everything is new to them, and things are usually said and done in their presence, to the extent that they are not scared to embrace new experiences. Adults on the contrary always strive to protect themselves from certain events and people. (LeSeur, ibid.)

Chapter II: Growing up black in an adult world

The following chapter deals with Sonny, Benji and Selina's relationship with the adult world, and how it plays an essential role both in manhood and womanhood. Family dynamics is an important theme in novels of formation because of the influence fathers and mothers have on their children, and the perceptions the children have about their parents. I will examine how the children perceive their parents and what they assimilate from them, questioning whether it is parental influence or the world surrounding them that plays the more significant role in shaping their selves. The focus of my analysis begins with the respective fathers, and how this differs from the relationship with their mothers. Another key difference refers to the father-son relationships that Sonny and Benji have with their respective fathers and the father-daughter relationship between Selina and her father. I intend to illustrate how the mother-son relationship, as described in *Manchild in the Promised Land* and *Sag Harbor*, is given less importance compared with the mother-daughter relationship described in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. I will then address my research question by considering the affinity Sonny, Benji, and Selina establish with adults that are not part of their family context. I will argue that these relationships are emblematic for their journey and are in fact the most influential in terms of the growing up process, since these adults help the children face conflicts between ethnic assimilation and individualism, while teaching them valuable lessons about life.

2.1. Family relationships

In every society the family represents the first socializing agent. It should be a safe place for every adolescent to learn how to behave outside of the domestic walls. Parents transmit their expectations and interpretations of society onto their sons and daughters. Most parents try to influence their children to help them to adapt to a given social context. Parents of an ethnic background especially promote values such as independence, self-expression, freedom, obedience to the authorities and appreciation of community. In *African American Boys: Identity, Culture, and Development (2015)*, Faye Z. Belgrave and Joshua Brevard state that the teachings

African American parents give their children about mainstream society are those that they need to know to succeed.[13] First, they teach them that it is important is attend school, get an education and a job: "[p]arents may tell their children that they have to work harder because of their race, and that education is especially needed in order for them to be successful." (Belgrave & Brevard, 44) Second, they transmit knowledge about what it means to be an African American in the United States in order to prepare them for eventual episodes of discrimination and racism, while also socializing them according to the African American cultural experience. Often, parents discuss historical events of relevance to the African American history in America with their children.

African American parents struggle to achieve for their children better living conditions than those they grow up with. Despite this, the outcome of the socialization of African American children does not necessarily depend on their family background. Sheila M. Littlejohn-Blake and Carol Anderson Darling state that "children of middle-income African American families are likely to mature at about the same age as their Euro-American counterparts, but children from low-income African American families usually mature earlier because of the age at which they are required to assume major family responsibilities." (463) Furthermore, African American children nowadays are taught to have positive relationships and to socialize with their white counterparts in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts, which is viewed as a survival technique that promotes and facilitates their entrance into the world of work. It is also necessary to build positive self-esteem along with ethnic awareness. In the journal article *Generations of Struggle* from *Transition No. 119 (2016)* Percy Green et al. suggest that

> [o]ur elders actually influenced us, there were people that we listened to. So I have to constantly knock the whole thing about 'young people don't listen to their elders,' because there's some elders who ain't worth listening to. Just because

[13] *African-American Boys: Identity, Culture, and Development (2015)* by Faye Z. Belgrave and Joshua Brevard offers a discussion on current research into identity formation, family and peer influence, concepts of masculinity and sexuality in African American boys, as well as risk factors relating to growing up black. The book focuses on African-American males in early and middle adolescence between the ages of 11-16 years old, the period in which many social, psychological and biological changes occur. The research proves that as soon as adolescents gain independence from their family, they spend a lot of time with their peers, and the positive outcome of this connection depends from how positive and pro-social the chosen peers are.

you've been on this earth for 89 years doesn't mean that you have the absolute answers to everything and that you cannot learn anything. (12)[14]

Belgrave and Brevard emphasize that fathers are important socializing agents for their sons. They consider a 2003 study by Bryant and Zimmerman in which the behavior of 679 African American ninth-graders from urban areas was monitored. It was found that those male adolescents without a male role figure in their family exhibited the most problematic behavior. Having a paternal role model helped achieve a positive school outcome, while female role models influenced psychological well-being. (Belgrave and Brevard, 37) It is easy for children to become rootless when they live in different mental worlds than their parents. Despite being older, parents do not necessarily have the answers for their children, often because they do not know nor understand the world in which they are living.

In his book *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction (2007)* Kenneth Millard suggests that in the Bildungsroman the issue of finding a place within society has a direct correlation with finding a satisfactory relationship with the father.[15] In fact, especially for young male protagonists, this relationship relates directly to socialization since the father represents the first figure that teaches him how society works: "coming of age is thus a drama of coming to terms with the father, and all the social and cultural governance for which he stands." (15) One might wonder how children come to terms with an absent father, and the social implications that this situation brings. In *Manchild in the Promised Land* the relationship Sonny has with his father is described not only as cruel and indifferent, but even as morally weak because of physical violence and emotional abuse. For example, the only bit of fatherly advice

[14] In the journal article 'Generations of Struggle from Transition' No. 119, Afro-Asian Worlds (2016), pp. 9-16, activists and scholars Percy Green II, Robin D. G. Kelley, Tef Poe, George Lipsitz, Jamala Rogers and Elizabeth Hinton discuss more than five decades of black action in St. Louis, from the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter. The excerpt is taken from a panel discussion at Harvard University on December 3, 2015, organized by the Charles Warren Center with support from the HipHop Archive and Research Institute.

[15] *Coming of age in Contemporary American Fiction (2007)* by Kenneth Millard shows how many contemporary American novelists present the Bildungsroman. The book analyses different American races, classes and genders throughout various contemporary coming-of-age novels. The main topics analysed are the importance of the relationship held with the father (also meant as The Father in a religious context), growing up in the 1960s, traumatic adolescence experiences and language acquisition.

that we are told the narrator receives is the following: “[t]hat' jis what you been doin' all you life, lookin' for a pea that ain't there. And I'm mighty 'fraid that's how you gon end your whole life, lookin' for that pea.” (Brown, 61) Elsewhere in the novel there are explicit descriptions of physical violence, for instance,

> Dad slapped me in the mouth. It didn't hurt much, but I got mad and I cried. I wanted to kill him for hitting me in front of all those people- and in fro of some of the guys I was bullying too. I said to myself, That's all right, 'cause when I git big enough to kill him, I'll jis have one more thing to kill him for. So I stopped crying. Dad was going to make me kill him. Sometimes I was only going to kick his ass real good when I got big, but then he would do something like that, and I would start planning to kill him again. (Brown, 52)

Sonny's father is mostly indifferent towards his son, and he even makes fun of his desire to better himself at the Wiltwyck School for socially and emotionally maladjusted boys, where he is sent after being arrested for stealing. What’s more, he struggles to convince his sons to do their best to succeed in their goals, which do not have to be ambitious ones but decent enough to guarantee survival. For instance, Sonny's father thinks that working as a busboy while earning $45 per week is a good deal, ignoring the fact that Sonny's generation asks for more than merely to survive. This is why, when Sonny informs his parents that he will stop working because it is difficult for him to deal with both work and school, his father replies with: “[b]oy, you don't need all that education[…]You ought to stop goin' to school and stop all that dreaming[…]go out there and get yourself a good job and keep it while you got it.” (Brown, 267) It is therefore difficult for Sonny to relate to an abusive father, who humiliates him in front of people, who bullies him, who is indifferent towards him, and who mocks him instead of supporting him in his hopes and ambitions. In light of this, I do not agree with what Millard suggests when he says that having a positive relationship with the father allows children to fit positively into society, since it is obvious that in Sonny's case, he will only succeed in realizing himself by relying on his own courage and determination. In addition to the boy's strong sense of self, what will also have a strong impact on his life choices are the teachings of a “father-surrogate”, namely Mr. Papanek, as will be explained in the following sub-chapter. Moreover,

Sonny does not come to terms with the social and cultural governance for which his father stands, since he is not supported in his choice to quit his job. Instead, and with the support of Mr. Papanek, he decides to dedicate himself to his own education.

In *Sag Harbor* Benji's parents resemble the idealized upper-middle-class parents portrayed in the African American sitcom The Cosby Show: "[w]e were a Cosby family, good on paper. That was the lingo. Father a doctor, mother a lawyer. Three kids, prep-schooled, with clean fingernails and nice manners."[16] (Whitehead, 160) Both Benji's parents work in the city, coming home only on weekends. It is thanks to his parents' secure employment that it is possible for him and his brother Reggie to spend the summer at Sag Harbor. During the week, they are left to fend for themselves, decidingto get summer jobs to have more money to be self-sufficient. This allows the two brothers and their friends to be free to be themselves, while making fun of their parents' generation. Despite this new freedom, there are still underlying problems. While it is true that they were a picture-perfect family, it is also true that "every magnificent home-entertainment advance increased the possibility that we wouldn't have to talk to one another. If we lived a hundred years in the future, we'd never have to deal with one another at all." (Whitehead, 173) Contrary to the Cosby family, his own family "knew itself as a kick in the shin and elbows in the stomach." (Whitehead, 173) Moreover, Benji knows that what happened in their family had to be kept within the family so that he "was wired not to let other people know [their] business. What happened in the house stayed in the house, caroming off the walls and furniture and us, until it was absorbed or forgotten." (Whitehead, 77) Although Benji's parents are mostly absent from the story, he reports his father's alcohol abuse that is his way to escape from city life each weekend. As a result, Benji and his family spend a great deal of their time attempting to avoid the father's anger. According to the noise his father

[16] The Cosby Show is a critically and commercially successful American television sitcom that aired from September 1984 until April 1992. The show is about the family life of the Huxtable family, an upper middle-class African-American family based in Brooklyn, New York, with black doctors and lawyers as part of it. Benji's family portrait from the outside may resemble that shown in The Cosby Show. Benji asks, "who are these people? We said: People we know. And we watched it" (Whitehead, 192-193). Nevertheless, being a "Cosby family", a "term of affection and admiration" (Whitehead, 193) is just a stereotype by which he is judged from the outside, because in truth he knows that the family protagonist of the sitcom is what life is supposed to be like, and not what it actually is, presenting a cultural standard of blackness that Benji is unable to meet, which adds to his identity crisis.

makes with the opening and closing of the liquor-cabinet, Benji acknowledges how much his father is drinking and therefore plans his escape. Once his father punches him after Benji tells him how he had walked away without a confrontation from a racial insult received from a white classmate. His father believes that this would teach him that he should never back down from a fight because nobody could hit him harder than he could. It is clear that the way his father faces the world and his bad habits have to do with his past:

> [m]y father would've kicked me out of the house if I walked in with a gold chain around my neck. Not that it ever would've occurred to me to get a gold chain. 'Who does he think he is?' I can hear my father say. 'Where does he think he comes from, the Street?' The Street in my father's mind was a vast, abstract plane of black pathology. (Whitehead, 87)

The generational gap between the father and son is once more the main theme in the narrative. Benji's father is very influential in shaping his ideas, and he intimidates him not to experience the modern black iconology, which could give the wrong impression about their well-being. As Benji recounts, his father had

> grown up poor, fighting his way home every day off Lenox Avenue, and any hint that he hadn't escaped, that all his suffering had been for naught, kindled his temper and his deep fear that aspiration was an illusion and the Street a labyrinth without exit, a mess of connecting alleys and avenues always leading back into itself. (Whitehead, ibid.)

Benji's father had gradually built an identity that denies his past, but while doing so, he keeps feeling misplaced. As such, *Sag Harbor* represents the progress for which Benji's African American forefathers had fought. Nevertheless, in *Colson Whitehead: the postracial voice of contemporary literature* (2015), Kimberly Fain argues that the characters of the novel are unable to appreciate hardship because of their economic privilege and their open access to "white spaces." (128)[17] Furthermore, Benji's father, who grew up in the rough inner city, listens to the Afrocentric radio and watches CNN

[17] In *Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature (2015)*, Kimberly Fain explores the work of the author protagonist, demonstrating how his works reconstruct the American Identity. Whitehead's novels discussed in this book are *The Intuitionist (1999), John Henry Days (2001), Apex Hides the Hurt (2006), The Colossus of New York (2003), Sag Harbor (2009) and Zone One (2011).*

specifically looking for reports of violence against African Americans. He sends his sons to an exclusive prep-school, but he is angered that they are learning nothing about African American history. Benji acknowledges, but cannot identify with, the racial insecurities of the older generation. He learns how society works through the eyes of his father, which reflect the old one he lived in. As such, this image has little to do with the society in which Benji now lives. This implies that it is impossible for him to come to terms with his father's social and cultural beliefs. What's more, Benji is increasingly influenced by the pop culture is that is becoming a larger part of his daily life.

In *Brown Girl,* Brownstones, Selina's parents are immigrants trying to succeed in a new country. Their community is known to be hardworking, and as a consequence, Selina's father Deighton is not well respected. In the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Selina would love to be like her father, a lover of life, a dreamer, someone who does not see any obstacles in life. Similarly to him, Selina shares his hostility against the other Barbadians whose only ambition in life is making money. However, Selina will later realize that it is her mother's strength that keeps the family alive. The difficulty in her parent's relationship is revealed by the anger of her mother, which is directed to her husband for not being a success like others in the community. Selina feels closer to her father, who has no goal to achieve, contrary to her mother who is obsessed with making money. That said, Selina does admire her mother's determination and ambition. In contrast to Benji and Sonny, Selina appreciates the time spent with her father, but she cannot trust him as a mentor, as he is not the strongest figure in her family. As such, it is important to closely examine the relationship Selina has with her mother by comparing it with that held by Benji and Sonny and their respective mothers.

The mother figure, and in particular the mother-daughter relationship, is emblematic in the female process of coming-of-age. When defining a woman, daughterhood and motherhood are the two main stages to emphasize. As with many teenagers, Selina struggles to find her own identity, and she is still unsure about who she is. Selina has a negative relationship with her severe and irritable mother Silla, who often complains about others, especially about her husband, Deighton. The novel is concerned with an uncommon family, where the mother is the boss, and this inversion

of roles ruptures the traditional representation of genre as it presents many women as owners of lands. Selina cannot easily abandon the controversy with her mother, as she is aware that the betrayal of her mother could be what brought her father to death. Selina rebels by refusing to pursue the career that her mother desires and with her relationship with Clive.

Lisa D. McGill suggests that Selina does not suffer from a modern kind of matrophobia since her relationship with her mother is not that negative. McGill suggests that

> [t]he womanist perspective of Paule Marshall is interestingly embedded in a sisterhood that celebrates a connection to American mothers. The black dyad in her fiction is presented as antagonistic, but loving; problematic, but central to the daughter's creation of an affirmed self. (34)

For McGill (ibid.), matrophobia "can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free." In the case of Selina and her mother, however, such a split is not possible because her narrative is "undergirded by the mother's presence as the daughter attempts to construct her place in American society." As a consequence, women should "think back through their mothers in order to define themselves." The matrophobia trope has been part of the analysis of the mother-daughter relationship in many contemporary American fictional works. Moreover, the matrophobia theoretical framework can be found in contemporary feminist discourse, whereby "the erasure of the mother – the attempt to position the mother as object and not subject of a novel – serves as a means by which theorists both argue a discontinuity with past ideas of femaleness and hypothesize the burgeoning presence of an autonomous female persona in American society." (ibid.)

For LeSeur, Silla transcends the traditional mother role because she embodies a "merging of the traditional male and female." Also because she is "often viewed differently by West Indian women than by African Americans, her position in the household is not a subservient one." (113) Nevertheless, Selina feels more closely attached to her mother than her father, as following her parents' arguments, Selina

"knew that this was her place, which for some reason she would always remain behind with her mother." (Marshall, 132) Moreover, despite her conflicted emotions towards her mother, she admires and recognizes the power in her words: "Selina listened. For always the mother's voice was a net flung wide, ensnaring all within its reach." (Marshall, 46) However, Selina will never be able to grow up entirely until she detaches herself from her mother, letting her become a martyr. Her conflict with her mother helps her to determine her sense of self, as she rejects everything she represents. It is not a coincidence that she refers to Silla as "the mother", not "my mother," as if she were an unattainable person, a goddess-like figure. Consequently, every sentence coming from "the mother" acquires a universal meaning concerning the mother-daughter duo rather than an individual relationship. Sometimes Selina detests many ways of being, values and actions of her mother, including when she reported her husband to the immigration authorities as illegal, causing him to be deported. At that moment, Selina expresses a deep hated her mother, shouting that she was "Hitler." That said, there are other times of great affection between the two, like when she spends the whole night held in her mother's arms. (LeSeur, 115)

Trudies Harries argues that "[t]here is something in Silla which precludes a closeness in the mother-daughter relationship, something which is increased by Selina's growth into womanhood and natural distance from her mother."[18](62)In fact, the mother represents everything Selina fights for, and this is why they usually argue, especially since Selina rejects the idea that "in making your way you always hurt someone" (Marshall, 307) and her ambition in purchasing brownstones. In order to achieve her ambitions, Silla would resort to any lie or manipulation. Selina soon realizes this when Silla manipulates the scholarship committee in her favor. This is a crucial point in the novel since Selina confesses her mother's manipulation and refuses the committee's money. Nevertheless, the conflicts between Selina and Silla result

[18] In "No Outlet for the Blues: Silla Boyce's Plight in Brown Girl, Brownstones" from *Callaloo* No. 18 (1983) Trudies Harris emphasizes the different kinds of influences Selina's mother and father have on her. Harris believes that Marshall's novel presents a clash of cultures, not only for the protagonist (caught between her father's love for Barbados and her mother's desire to succeed at the American Dream), but also for Silla, who keeps striving in the face of all disappointments, turning out to be for Harris one of the most complex black women characters in contemporary American literature. Nevertheless, despite this, Harris emphasizes that Silla is unable to change enough to escape her depression.

more from their resemblances than their differences, since “two head-bulls can't reign in a flock.” (ibid.)

> Everybody used to call me Deighton's Selina, but they were wrong. Because you see I'm truly your child. Remember how you used to talk about how you left home and came here alone as a girl of eighteen and as your own woman? I used to love hearing that. And that's what I want. I want it! (ibid.)

This moment, in particular, demonstrates Selina's need to be an independent person, to free herself from her mother’s influence and to progress as a person, even if she is aware that doing so would not deny the connection between mother and daughter. Through her rebellion Selina demonstrates her need for her mother and her need to be recognized as Silla’s daughter, because, “above all, she longed to understand the mother, for she new, obscurely, that she would never really understand anything until she did.” (Marshall, 145) Silla’s position as the male figure in the family is emphasized by the way in which her body is described, not with reference to the elegance typically associated with women, but in terms of its strength and resilience:

> Silla Boyce brought the theme of the winter into the park with her dark dress amid the summer green and the bright-fingered housedresses of the women lounging on the benches there. Not only that, every line of her strong-made body seemed to reprimand the women for their idleness and the park for its senseless summer display. Her lips, set in a permanent protest against life, implied that there was no time for gaiety. And the park, the women, the sun gave way to her dark force; the flushed summer colors ran together and faded as she passed. (Marshall, 16)

Another example is when Silla discovers that her husband wants to keep his inherited land in Barbados. His wife, on the other hand, wishes to sell it. This conflict can be found in the chapter aptly titled “The War”, which can also be a reference to the war that Silla fights every day against her husband. A prominent feature in their arguments is Silla’s feeling of blame towards her husband for not having any job: “[w]ith a look both cruel and pitying she said, 'You don't want no job […] Instead of going to some small office where he might have a chance-no, he got to play like he's

white." (Marshall, 82) Her masculinity is emphasized, not only by the way in which she speaks, but also because her job at the "old-fashioned lathe" factory:

> Silla worked at an old-fashioned lathe which resembled an oversize cook stove, and her face held the same transient calm which often touched it when she stood at the stove at home. Like the others, her movements were attuned to the mechanical rhythms of the machine-mass. She fitted the lump of metal over the lathe center and, with a deft motion, secured it into the headstock and doved the tailstock into position. The whine of her lathe lifted thinly above the roar as the metal whirled into shape. Then she released the tailstock and held the shell up for a swift scrutinizing glance before placing it with the other finished shells. Quickly she moved into the first phase of the cycle again. […] Only the mother's own formidable force could match that of the machines; only the mother could remain indifferent to the brutal noise. (Marshall, 100)

"It done now […]. 'And it can't be undone" is what Silla abruptly declares to Deighton as soon as she has sold his land, using a tone that assumes decision-making power. (Marshall, 109) This kind of masculine power is evident elsewhere also, as with the following example: "[t]he mother's smile had burgeoned into a laugh by now and she sat there holding a slip of paper and laughing with hollow, frightening triumph." (Marshall, ibid.)

It should be added that the controversy between Silla and Deighton sees its origins in the death of their only male child years before, and that he is not the dream husband as he is a cheater. Above all, the novel underlines both the separation and the connection between mother and daughter, both in the refusal of Selina towards the ideals and methods of the mother, and admitting their resemblances. By recognizing the power of the mother, the text shows that both processes are necessary for the coming of age of the daughter, as the conflict between mother and daughter is the result of their maternal bond and their joint formation of identity, instead of something that could avoid this union.

In *Manchild in the Promised Land* Sonny's mother differs significantly from the stereotypical African American mother, which is a strong and influential figure. In Sonny's case, his father is abusive while his mother stands by sympathetic but helpless.

As such, Sonny has a parent-like behavior towards his brother, which is emphasized when he discovers that his brother is using heroin:

> I thought I had gotten him ready. I thought I had taught him ready. I thought I had taught him enough. Maybe he just came out of the house too late; maybe Mama held on to him too long. (Brown, 285)

Sonny is the only one who knows how to live in Harlem since his parents are still conditioned by their experience living in the South. Moreover, Sonny views his parents with disappointment: his mother has only a fifth-grade education, his father one year less. When Sonny's brother tells their mother that he would like to join the Air Force, she answers: “Boy, don't you go wantin' things that ain't for you. You just go out there and get you a good job.” (Brown, 268) Sonny cannot cope with his parents' fears while his parents cannot understand his own nor his brother’s dreams.

In *Sag Harbor* Benji's mother had also spent her summer in Sag Harbor when she was younger. As soon as the summer arrives, Benji’s mother is depicted as revitalizing herself, which is at a sharp contrast to her typically fraught character when she is with her husband. Benji recognizes that “[That] was how [his] mother disappeared.” (Whitehead, 190)

> Always this magic happened: as the summer went on, she got younger and younger. The sun tanned her skin to a strong, vital brown, and her thin crow’s feet disappeared, ushering an impish twinkle in her eyes. [...] Out there she was a different person. [..] Sag Harbor worked on her in a way I’d never seen it do other people. There was a part of her that only existed out there. (Whitehead, 169)

Benji's mother is not very influential in the story, not only because she is mostly absent from the story, which is concerned largely with the boys’ experiences, but also because when family scenes are described, she does not have much decision-making power and exerts little influence over her children. What’s more, from the description of the mother throughout the novel, it can be deduced that her personality is suppressed by her husband to the point of it disappearing entirely.

2.2. Relationships with other adults

It is important to analyze how and why adults who are not part of the protagonist's family sphere exert a much stronger influence than their biological relatives. Probably because these people do not hesitate to teach these children their experiences, or points of view, even the darkest or most hidden ones, since they do not have any responsibility for them. Contrary to what his parents want for him, Sonny comes to understand that education is the most powerful tool for himself realization. He learns this when he meets Mr. Papanek, the administrator of Wiltwyck School, who encourages him to continue his education to escape Harlem street life. For Sonny, Mr. Papanek is a father-like role model who influences him with his kindness, his knowledge and his ability to read people. He is the first adult to recognize a potential in Sonny to rise above the traditional expectations of a black child from Harlem. Sonny is impressed by Mr. Papanek's ability to command respect using his intellect rather than physical strength:

> He had the ability to see everybody as they really are—just people, no more and no less. Also he saw children as people, little young people with individuality, not as some separate group of beings called children, dominated by the so-called adult world. [...] Papanek had a way of making the whole world seem beautiful and making everybody in life seem to be important. And he made life important from the standpoint of the individual. (Brown, 109)

Sonny feels valued as a person for the first time in his life, and comes to understand how through education he can develop his intelligence and therefore increase his sense of self-worth.

Unlike in *Sag Harbor*, where the influence of an non-family adult is illevelant, in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* "[t]he 'community' or 'village' idea is present on another level in the African American novels if we consider the brownstone house in which Selina's family lives in Brooklyn as being a community." (LeSeur, 23) In fact, Selina's education does not come solely from her parents, but also from other sources, such as the various tenants living in the same building, who give her important life recommendations as though they were close family members. Moreover, what adds

another dimension to the girl's growing up process is the “idea of leaving home.” While still forming her identity, Selina tries to reconcile the differences between her parents, as well as appropriating characteristics from other women as her own, as is the case with Miss Thompson and Suggie Skeete. By doing this, Selina's is “attempting to escape the dominion of the maternal voice through the construction of relationships outside of Silla's space.” (McGill, 34) Although her mother does not approve of Selina’s relationships with these women, Selina recognizes the value of their life experiences. What’s more, they are her main confidants while she is struggling with her burgeoning sexuality and race awareness.

Suggie Sketee is a woman who enjoys the pleasures of life, such as having sex and drinking rum, and does not concern herself with problems or frustrations. Like Deighton, she loves Barbados, but contrary to his desire to return she is not interested in returning, as the following example shows: “Go back? Where? Home, you mean?... You think I looking to dead before my time? Do you know how bad those malicious brutes would lick their mouth on me if I went back the same way I left?” (Marshall, 208) Suggie is an occupant of the same brownstone house where the Boyce family lives. She works as a live-in maid for a white family. In terms of her relationship with Selina, she educates her about sexual matters, while the other two women are more concerned with shaping other aspects of Selina's personality.

> Suggie introduces Selina to the concept of sex as pleasurable, desirable, and fulfilling and offers a model in herself of an unconventional alternative to Barbadian mores of marriage, motherhood, and monogamy. In contrast, premarital sex is depicted by Silla as evil and unacceptable, as grounds for being labeled a whore. Furthermore, Suggie teaches Selina to embrace life rather than dwell self-destructively on death. She persuades her finally to replace her black mourning attire with more colorful clothes, symbolic of life, after the death of Selina's father. (LeSeur, 118)

Suggie is an emblematic character, so much so that Marshall decides not to reveal too much about her. She is ambivalent since she is introduced as a very lonely person, yet secure in her own particular way, as well as cheerful and carefree. Selina cannot help but admire her and Suggie teaches her not to care too much about other people's

opinion about her and to live in the way that makes her most happy. Selina quickly notices the difference between Suggie and her mother: the first lives so that she can work, while the latter works so that she can live. Silla has adapted herself to society demands, and even if she is unsatisfied, she will do everything to get a house. Her betrayal is an example of how far she is willing to go to achieve her objectives, and yet, what she feels she gets in return for her efforts is an empty life, entirely dedicated to her children who do not even seek her support. By contrast, Suggie has sexual intercourse with different men every weekend, though it's likely that Selina represents an opportunity for Suggie to find herself too. Suggie's life is probably not what she would have wished for when she was as young as Selina is when they first meet, despite this Suggie believes she can help her by giving her insights into the process of self-knowledge. She knows better what it means to be a black woman in a predominantly white society, and she quickly wants to interact with Selina when she notices how disoriented and scared she is when she arrives from Barbados. It is probable that Suggie sees a bit of her young self in Selina, or perhaps, she sees what she wanted to be. When they meet, Selina still has the vitality of youth despite the hard life she probably lived in Barbados. As soon as Suggie realizes how Selina is still ignorant about many aspects of life, such as sexuality, she realizes that she is in need of a friend and decides to be her guide.

For Selina, Suggie represents "the archetypal Barbadian mother in the United States." (McGill, 35) Suggie encourages Selina to shape her identity in a slightly different way from the Bajan-American Silla's one. Essentially, Suggie gives life to Selina's inner femininity: "[s]he returned with a small glass of rum. 'Come,' she beckoned, 'I gon make you a summer woman too, just for your womanishness." (Marshall, 52) Nevertheless, she soon realizes that Selina is not the typical "summer woman" since she is not particularly interested in meeting men.

Another influential woman is Miss Thompson, who Selina describes as having "taken it upon herself to put me in closer touch with the Afro American culture that was also my birthright." (Marshall, 41) Crucially, Miss Thompson provides Selina "with a link to her half forgotten African past." (Marshall, ibid.) Miss Thompson's background of victimization by whites is representative for Selina of the risks of being both black

and a woman in a predominantly white environment. Miss Thompson offers insights about how women bear suffering, which Marshall describes as “an African wood carving: mysterious, omniscient, [...] the eyes shrouded with a profound sadness.” (Marshall, ibid.) Miss Thompson fulfills the role of the mother where Silla failed, chiefly because of her attachment to money. She instructs Selina that “she must first acquire an understanding of her people and their political objectives before she can self-righteously reject them.” (LeSeur, 118) She also persuades her to attend the meetings of the Barbadian Association, at which point Selina's inner conflicts begin to grow. She also gives Selina her first set of curls and recognizes Selina’s need to confront her mother with regard to the sale of her father's lands. Moreover, it is thanks to Miss Thompson that she is first put in contact with the meaning of racism.

Miss Mary is another important woman for Selina. She is the new owner of the brownstone house and lives with her daughter Maritze. She is important for the growth of Selina because she shows her that human value is not determined by skin color or race, and thanks to her she experiences what will be her first connection with the outside world, when she visits the community of Barbadian immigrants. Moreover, she learns that not every white person has power or money, and becomes more open-minded about the world surrounding her. Selina's growth is guided by each of these three women and each becomes a kind of surrogate mother who help her to find herself, while providing her with both questions and answers.

In the Bildungsromans with male protagonists it seems that the most problematic issue is the lack of parental authority, and in some cases, the children must raise themselves. In *Sag Harbor,* Benji sees his parents every weekend, yet all of his and his friends' growing up experiences over the course of the summer occur without their parents' supervision. Similarly, in *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Sonny has to deal with the difficulties of life in Harlem, which includes drugs, shootings and deaths. Because of his troublesome behavior as a child, his early-life is experienced mostly in different reformation schools far from home. With time, he matures into a more responsible adult than his brother, who spends more time living with their parents and suffers from problems with drugs and is later sent to prison.

In these coming-of-age novels with male narrators both fear their fathers. In Sonny's case, he does not really talk with his father and fears physical violence at his hands. He finds a father-like figure in Mr. Papanek, from whom he is ready to learn. In Benji's case, the whole family tries to stay as far away from the father as possible because of his alcoholism and the bad behavior associated with it.

Considering all three of the novels, the character of the mother is the most complex. In Selina's case, the mother is central to the growing up process: it is her complexity that plays an essential role in shaping the daughter's personality and making her grow as a person. Usually, what a young girl learns about being a woman is taught by her mother, both in the case of refusal and acceptation. Both the tension and the connection between them encourages the daughter to grow up and to fight for who she is. In any of the three novels, it does not matter if the mother is loving, present, friendly or antagonistic, in any case, the mother represents the first person to whom the son or daughter relates, and whether fighting against them or receiving their support, this relationship is the starting point from which they can begin to build their complex self.

In each of the three Bildungsroman, the difficulties faced in the relationships between the parents and the children suggest the impossibility of reconciliation between the two generations, probably because of the difficult past experiences that the parents faced during their childhood. In Benji's case, it is clear that there is no adult influence available to him that is different from that of his biological parents. As such, the boy looked for other influences outside of his family: his peers. Assuming this, the next chapter will consider to what extent peers influence the identity building process of the protagonists of the three novels.

Chapter III: Growing up black with peers

Having discussed in the previous chapter the ways in which the protagonists mature thanks to adult influences that are external to the family, this chapter will consider how relationships with peers can be influential to the maturation process in that they signify a mandatory rite of passage. Whenever parental or other adult influences are absent, the children resort to other learning sources. The relationships that the protagonists of the novels in question have with their respective peers is more dynamic than that of their parents, as they are considered equals, which generates a feeling of intimacy that is impossible to achieve in the parent-child relationship. In this chapter I consider peers to mean those characters that are the same age as the protagonist, as well as sharing a similar background, social status and life experiences. In particular, I will consider the power of peer pressure, which refers to an instance when peers influence the protagonist to do something s/he does not want to do. This could include changing one's attitude or opinion to conform to the group. I aim to demonstrate that this can result in either a positive or a negative effect.

In order to analyse the importance of peers in the lives of Sonny, Benji and Selina, I will adopt Margaret Beale Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) as described by Belgrave & Brevard in *African American Boys: Identity, Culture & Development (2015)*.[19] This theory "links both culture and context to individuals' meaning-making processes and their resulting identity formation." (Belgrave & Brevard, 8) The theory therefore assumes that an individual's cultural environment influences the formation of identity. It consists of five primary components: *risk*, *stress*, *coping*, *identity*, and *life outcomes*. *Risk* relates to the challenges that a youth faces in his/her development, while *stress* is linked to

[19] Inspired by Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory, the PVEST offer an expansion of the former theory by considering the experience of African-Americans. It was developed by Margaret Beale Spencer to examine strength and resiliency, especially during the process of identity formation in adolescents. It addresses the social, historical, and cultural context in which youths develop, as well as the perceptions and self-appraisals that individuals use to form their identity. It is a reciprocal theory and suggests that for African-Americans, contributions to risk include social-cognitively based social and self-appraisals linked to race, gender, socioeconomic status, physical status, and biological characteristics. Margaret Beale Spencer is an American psychologist who dedicated her work to issues concerning ethnicity, gender, and race in relation to youth and adolescent development. She has published over 115 articles and chapters, and currently works as the Marshall Fields IV Professor of Urban Education in the Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago.

particularly challenging experiences. In response to these stressful experiences, the youth will adopt a variety of *coping* methods. As a result, *identity* will be formed, once the coping strategies produce desirable results. After this point, identities become emergent identities that "define how individuals see themselves in their respective social contexts." (Belgrave & Brevard, 10) *Life outcomes* depend on the behaviours one's identity produces. Through these processes I can come to a clearer understanding about the development of the African American adolescent protagonists in each of the three novels.

By using the PVEST theory I will examine the influence of peers on adolescents who are facing an identity crisis as they begin to discover who they are. As Belgrave and Brevard state, “[p]eers provide both positive opportunities for growth and development along with challenges that may lead to risky behaviors.” (49) As such, this chapter will consider both the positive and the negative influences peers have on both Sonny and Benji. I will also attempt to determine whether or not it is true that negative influences tend to occur in low-resource communities, as the PVEST theory claims. Moreover, since Belgrave and Brevard’s analysis is concerned with African American boys, it will be necessary to consider whether or not the theory applies to girls, and in particular to Selina. As Belgrave and Brevard remind us in *African American Boys: Identity, Culture and Development (2015)*, “African American adolescent males attempt to find and position themselves within a peer group, which they refer to by a number of names, including 'boys,' 'homeboys,' 'homies,' 'niggas,' and 'peeps'.” (ibid.) As a result, peers may influence the protagonists’ formation of identity more so than that of their parents. Some adolescents concede to peer pressure because they want to fit in, or because they do not want to be bullied by the group if they do not conform to its standards. Most often, this occurs in low-resource environments, which are defined by Belgrave and Brevard as “settings in which peer relationships become gateways to illicit economies, gang affiliations, drug use, and other health risk behaviors.” (50) According to this approach, protagonists can learn from their own mistakes, as well as learning how to be like their peers and how not to be like them. It is not to be assumed that peer pressure is necessarily negative. Positive peer pressure

can be a powerful weapon to encourage children who are misbehaving to change their behaviour for the better.

3.1. Growing Up With a Negative Peer Pressure

In *Manchild in the Promised Land* Claude Brown begins the novel with an image of Sonny, at the age of thirteen wounded by a bullet and wavering between life and death. As a child, he is continually exposed to the atrocities of the streets of Harlem, to such an extent that he ends up embracing the street life of drugs, crime, and failure. In doing so, he concedes to peer pressure, though later he does decide not to be involved with the gangs, crime or drugs. As described by Belgrave and Brevard, the presence of gangs is a significant problem for African American boys living in the inner city. For those adolescents who live in low-resource environments, peers are "bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes which generally include the conducted of illegal activity and control over a particular territory." (61) As such, peer groups become a considerably more important social network than the biological family, particularly gangs, which are a "close-knit peer groups that function as family to provide psychosocial needs and protection for youth." (ibid.)

That said, being part of a gang is also associated with criminal behavior, such as "violence, weapon carrying, homicide, delinquency, drug use and trafficking, and risky sexual activity." (ibid.) Sonny's rebellious conduct is a way to cope with his feelings of helplessness. Plus, it is easier to earn money by dealing drugs and prostituting than having regular jobs. Consequently, there is no shame in participating in criminal activity providing you can earn from it. Perhaps the boys also consider criminality as a means of asserting one's individuality in an oppressive atmosphere by acting out in violence. When they're caught, Sonny and his peers are too young for prison and are sent instead to a reform institution for juvenile delinquents. The majority of Sonny's teenage years are a cycle of crime and reform institutions. Sonny is not stupid, however, since he does learn from his experiences and later realizes that his crimes will land him permanently in jail. He manages to escape the early death and

long-term incarceration that becomes the destiny for many of his boyhood friends. Throughout the novel, Brown emphasises that childhood is not easy in Harlem. Rather, it is a period to be endured, a rite of passage characterised by fear and corruption. Sonny undergoes many challenging experiences, including surviving a shooting, dealings with heroin, gang fights, and midnight robberies, only to see his hands empty and his road closed. Eventually, Sonny is encouraged away from Harlem because of his feelings of acute fear of what he sees around him and his ability to hope for something more. As Reno would say, Sonny's friend who teaches him how to hustle:

> Man, Sonny, they ain't got no kids in Harlem. I ain't never seen any. [...] nobody has time for a childhood. Man, do you ever remember bein' a kid? Not me. Shit, kids are happy, kids laugh, kids are secure. They ain't scared-a nothing. [...] I ain't neve been a kid, man. I don't even remember bein' happy and not scared. (Brown, 272)

Unlike Sonny, there was no hope for his friends who died from overdoses or prostituted themselves to pay for drugs. Sonny does not pretend to be able to answer why some could escape the drugs and violence while others succumbed, although he recognizes luck as a factor.

In the early days, Sonny's best friend is Knoxie, a rebel who wants to be the leader of the group and who refuses to follow Sonny’s demands to such an extent that he gains his respect: “[w]e started a gang, and I was president and Knoxie was war conselor. Knoxie was a good war conselor because he started a lot of fights.” (Brown, 45) The two become real friends when Sonny defeats Knoxie during a fight. Their friendship reveals one central trait in Sonny's character: the emphasis on manliness. Later on, Knoxie will acknowledge his homosexuality. As a youngster, Knoxie teases Sonny about his bucktoothed girlfriend, which illustrates his desire to be accepted by the other members of the gang; he wants to make them aware that Sonny is the one who is different, not himAt the same time as when Sonny meets Knoxie, he also meets Bulldog. Bulldog does not warrant Sonny's respect because he is "real dumb" and will do anything that Sonny tells him. (Brown, ibid.) On the other hand, Knoxie does not follow any of Sonny’s orders and even insists on being the leader. Significantly, Sonny

and Knoxie's friendship develops only when Sonny defeats Knoxie in physical combat. In seems that Sonny demands friendship from someone with courage and ability.

Among his friends, Sonny is the smartest, a fact which is most apparent in his relationship with K.B. and Knoxie, "because [he] could read and knew a lot of words." (Brown, 67) Later on, while at Wiltwyck reform school, Sonny chooses K.B. as best friend, "[w]e had three fights before we decided we couldn't beat each other, but it was a year before we got tight." (Brown, ibid.)[20] Sonny demonstrates how he wants to prove his manhood as K.B. is someone who can fight too, a fact which they both admire about one another. As Sonny says, him and K.B. "just pulled tight and started getting in trouble together, stealing things and fighting together." (Brown, ibid.) K.B. shared many of Sonny's ghetto experiences and was subject to the same peer pressures, as well as fighting, stealing, and other criminal activities. Although both boys are exposed to drugs, Sonny becomes sick during his first heroin experience, which is beneficial for him in the long-term. Had this happened to K.B., he may have taken another route, as Sonny did. While the boys are inmates at Warwick reform school, Sonny is fortunate enough to work for the superintendent's wife.[21] There he is exposed to books and a different philosophy. Unfortunately, K.B. does not share this positive experience with Sonny. On the surface, K.B. has just as many opportunities to succeed in the ghetto as Sonny does, however, he lacks the inner strength to envision another life away from the street. On the contrary, it seems to be beyond K.B.'s will to leave street life.

For all ethnic groups, peers play an important role in influencing the behaviour of adolescents, both dangerous and beneficial ones, including drug use and abuse. Research on the general youth population suggests that "peer influence carries more weight than parental influence with regard to substance use", but this may not apply to African American youths, as the research suggests that "family factors might be

[20] Wiltwyck School for Boys first opened to juvenile delinquents in 1936 and was located in Esopus, New York, on the opposite side of the Hudson River from the Roosevelt's family home. The school had success in treating the troubled youngsters who attended, most of whom had grown up in bad New York neighbourhoods such as Harlem. The school was closed in 1981 due to a lack of money.

[21] Warwick Reform School was the New York State Training School for Boys and is now the site of the Mid-Orange Correctional Facility.

more influential than peer factors in substance use among African American youth." (Belgrave & Brevard, 54) On one occasion when he's back home from Wiltwyck reform school, Sonny meets Danny, Butch, and Kid, some of his old friends, yet they have changed, as Sonny says "[they] weren't doing the things [they] used to do, and they didn't want to do the things that [he] wanted to do." (Brown, 93) Danny, for example, is cured of drug addiction and is a positive influence on Sonny. At this point, however, the boys tell Sonny about a new drug they call "horse" which is heroin. The older boys do not allow Sonny to participate in taking the substance, however, which makes him feel isolated. He realizes at this point that he is willing to do whatever it takes to be part of the group. After Sonny's first experience with horse, Danny slaps him many times and threatens to kill him if he ever catches him with the drug again. Danny is the one who teaches Sonny how street life works, but only out of a sense of community. Because of this intervention, Sonny comes to understand the dangers of the drug. Before it is too late, Sonny is determined to change and become more independent. Another gang member is Butch, who is first introduced as a member of the Buccaneers, a bebopping gang. He teaches Sonny about street life. Because he is older than Sonny and more experienced as a gang member, he feels obliged to help his younger friend. It is Butch who teaches Sonny the art of "ringing cash registers." (Brown, 31) Later Butch becomes a heroin addict. His death by falling off a Harlem roof causes Sonny and Danny to reflect on the lives they have led. Butch, among others, is a classic example of the black ghetto male who lives by his wits on the streets. There is no way for Butch to succeed in the traditional sense, yet by his own evaluation he does succeed. He is a good fighter and a good thief and attaches credibility to taking heroin.

The street is known, not to be a specific location, but instead refers to a place where "marginalized and oppressed African American boys go to get their social and psychological needs met." (Belgrave and Brevard, 57) It is on the street where the social values of African American manhood are passed down from the older to the younger peers. Despite this, it turns out that the street is probably not the best site for socialization for African American boys because there they are most likely to learn values that can be counter-productive to their success in mainstream society. (Belgrave and Brevard, ibid.) Sonny describes his early habitat in the following passage:

> I always ran away [from youth shelters] to get back to the streets. I always thought of Harlem as home, but I never thought of Harlem as being in the house. To me home was the streets. I suppose there were many people who felt that. If home was so miserable, the street was the place to be. (Brown, 429)

As soon as Sonny leaves prison after two and a half years, he discovers that the community he knew has changed: his old friends try to prevent him from using drugs; older boys teach the younger ones step-by-step to ensure that they will prepared for possibly dangerous experiences.

Throughout his journey, Sonny does not only experience positive influences, but as the PVEST theory suggests, also the negative ones that are often occur in low-resource environments. Johnny D., the neighbourhood criminal who passes on much of his street philosophy to Sonny, is the representation of all the negative aspects of big city ghettos, particularly because he is a pimp who mistreats all the women he procures. However, he is the first black man Sonny meets who seems to have control of his situation and he influences Sonny for the years to come. Johnny D. is an inherently immoral individual who is involved in every evil and corruptible situation that occurs in his environment. He violates every precept of middle-class morality. Moreover, Johnny D. is articulate and intelligent and his lessons for Sonny about his street philosophy are effective because they seem to work in practice. When Sonny follows Johnny D.'s advice about women, he is successful in his undertakings. Johnny D. is also a thief and cheats everyone he deals with. He is willing to transmit his perverted ideas to the young Sonny, who is strongly influenced by him. Notably, he introduces Sonny to heroin, and exploits his desire for heroin by cheating him. Sonny tries the heroin but rejects it and becomes ill. Despite being a drug dealer later on, he does not enjoy the experience of using the drug and therefore avoids becoming an addict like Johnny D. After his first experience with heroin, he resolves never to use it again. At this point, it is Danny who helps Sonny by reprimanding him to stop taking drugs by threatening again to kill him if he discovers he's using heroin. Thanks to Danny's help, there is hope for Sonny. The same cannot be said for Johnny D., who believes that to be respected in Harlem, you have to be a "bad nigger" who is prepared to die.

Peers also play an important role in terms of influencing how one behaves in romantic relationships. In fact, most adolescents learn about sex from their peers, who provide models for relationship expectations and sexual activity. The African American male known as a “player” or a “pimp” are those that have the most success with girls. Being a player or a pimp "seems to be a way for some inner-city African American males to earn esteem from their peers and make themselves feel like men.” (Belgrave and Brevard, 62) Sexual skills are a determinant of these young boys’ transition into manhood, and can be seen in the episode in the dormitory where the boys of Aggrey House try to ejaculate. Even if it may be revolting to some people, for these boys “it was a matter of life or death.” (Brown, 68) Belgrave and Brevard state that many African American boys confessed feeling pressure to have sexual relationships and were ridiculed by their peers if they did not. Johnny D.'s treatment of women is representative of how women are perceived and treated in the ghetto environment. (56) They exist only to please men and are not treated with respect. This is probably an explanation of why *Manchild in the Promised Land* does not have any traditional romance.

Later on in the novel, the pressures of the street will lead Sonny into an unfortunate situation when he and Turk “steal some sheets” (Brown, 125) from the clotheslines of the tenement occupants. Sonny is shot but survives, which makes him feel like a real man, partly because of a change in his reputation among his peers. Turk is one of the original members of the gang the Buccaneers, but he manages to escape a life of crime through his boxing career. He and Sonny spend a lot of time together, fighting and stealing at a time before Sonny is sent to Wiltwyck reform school. After Sonny is shot in the stomach it is Turk who discovers him. In this critical situation, however, with his friend injured, Turk thinks only of himself in that his sole concern is that Sonny will not involve him. At this point in the narrative, Turk shows no loyalty to his friend. Later on, after he enlists in the Air Force, his character changes and he is better able to handle himself well with his fists and develops more confidence. With his Air Force contacts, Turk is able to do the thing he can do best: fight. He is able to regard the gang fights and the stealing as just a phase of his life, a phase he does not intend to repeat. As a result of his qualities, he can be considered as one of the

genuine heroes of the story; in fact, no one knows how much encouragement he received from others during his stint outside of Harlem. Somewhere, however, he developed middle-class values. It is clear that after his Air Force experience, he is a different person. Before that time, he thought only of himself; afterward, he thought about others. He shares his wealth with drug addicts and develops a one man-one world approach to life. Most important, he is a source of inspiration to Sonny and others in the Harlem community.

Once outside of Harlem, Sonny meets a variety of people who show him various alternatives to his former lifestyle. At this same time, Sonny becomes aware of jazz music and its reflection of African American culture. He also begins to experiment with various spiritual movements. After hearing about the Coptic faith from one of his Harlem friends, Billie Dobbs, Sonny becomes involved. However, Sonny considers religion as a kind of escape mechanism for weak people who are exploited. In this way, religion for Sonny is similar to drugs. Despite his opinions, Sonny spends four months studying and absorbing the Coptic doctrine. In the beginning, he has an insatiable appetite for new learning and knowledge. He demonstrates this numerous times, for example, when he learns the piano: “I decided that I wanted to get a piano. I wanted to play.” (Brown, 217) Moreover, Sonny is curious to know why something is the way it is and why things work the way they do. This spirit of investigation drives him to examine the Coptic faith. He is especially inquisitive when he realizes that Billy has changed because of the very thing he accuses others of doing, finding an escape mechanism. Having left Harlem, Sonny must now fill the void for the activities of the piano, the gym and school. This is where the Coptic faith comes into play. The time and energy required to study the religion leave him little occasion to brood about the past and about how his boyhood community has changed. After studying the religion for four months, however, he comes to the inescapable conclusion that the Coptic faith is not genuine; it is a fraud. To accept the beliefs of the Coptic church without feeling any real kinship to Africa, combined with the feeling that Africans do not accept American blacks, is inconceivable for Sonny. Ultimately, from Sonny’s perspective, the religion does not work in practice.

Another peer of Sonny's is Tony Albee, who listens to Sonny's advice and eventually leaves Harlem with him. Tony is the embodiment of the positive black boy in the ghetto. He comes from a sheltered family environment and has been admonished by his parents to stay away from the people on the street. He has been taught to believe that he is morally superior to people on the street. Regardless, like most African American adolescents in the ghetto, Tony must eventually come into contact with street life if he wants to survive. He has a choice of taking a menial subservient job that is emasculating, or he can look to the street people for advice and help in making a living. The suggestions may be illegal, but they will command respect. Tony chooses the latter. Naturally, the people on the street do not welcome him with open arms, since they sense that Tony consider them inferior. Fortunately for Tony, he meets Sonny when Reno is not present. Reno cannot accept Tony under any condition though Sonny can and help him prepare for life on the street. This proves to be fairly straightforward since Tony is an apt pupil who is willing to do whatever is necessary in order to gain street respectability. Consequently, he is open to the idea of leaving Harlem with Sonny and attending high school. In time, Tony feels similar to Sonny as he also experiences a change in his values. His respect for Sonny makes him willing to follow Sonny out of street life. In the end, however, Tony cannot handle a part of street life that Sonny has mastered—the drug scene. Unfortunately, his life is cut short.

Sonny cultivates his friendship with Reno because he knows his friendship is necessary for him to survive on the street. For him, Reno is similar to Johnny D., and he accepts both of them as friends because of what he can learn from them as they are both older and have similar backgrounds. Both treat women with disdain and rebel against middle-class values. Reno teaches Sonny how to take advantage of the weaknesses of others. By contrast, Danny comforts Sonny during a crisis, he is a very present friend who acts positively whenever he needs help, and Sonny does the same for him by giving him drugs to sustain his addiction. Even if it is not really an act of friendship, Sonny does so because he does not want to see his friend suffer. As Sonny says, "Danny had been strung out four years. I guess he felt that he didn't have much going for him. [...] He felt that life was over for him." (Brown, 159)

3.2. The ambiguity of peer pressure

In *Sag Harbor* the growing up process takes place over the course of a single summer in 1985. At this time, Benji and his peers act without any adult supervision. For this reason, Sag Harbor is the perfect place for Benji and his friends to relax and to begin realizing the kind of people they want to be. By contrast to Sonny, Benji is familiar with a predominantly white world as he attends a predominantly white school, which is privately run. At Sag Harbor, however, him and his friends spend the summer in a predominantly black environment, and it is here that Benji feels he can be himself without worrying about what people will think. The boys relate to one another based on their financial and social status, for example, whether or not they have a car. The boys surrounding Benji at Sag Harbor are: his brother Reggie, NP, Bobby, Nick and Randy. NP is a young man whose family spends their summers at Sag Harbor. His nickname, NP, refers to the many fictional stories that NP likes to tell: "[w]e called him NP, for Nigger Please, because no matter what came out of his mouth, that was usually the most appropriate response." (30) The name was shortened because adults had scolded the boys when they heard them using the word "nigger". NP's real name is never given. He is the troublemaker of the group, the one who often concocts crazy schemes to gain entrance into places they should not go. Another of Benji's peers is Bobby, an angry young man who blames his mother for all the bad things that happened to him because she works for Wall Street. Bobby is the second boy to get a car during the summer of 1985, giving all his friends rides in East Hampton. Bobby becomes the first of the group, along with NP, to have a steady girlfriend that summer, thanks partly to him having a car. Another member of the group is Nick, whose family used to visit Sag Harbor in the summer, but his parents divorced and his mother chose to live at Sag Harbor permanently. For this reason, Nick goes from being part of the summer group to not being one of the group anymore. When he is first introduced, Nick is described as wearing chunky gold jewelry and carrying a large radio that is blasting out his mixtapes. He works with Benji at Jonni Waffle, an ice cream parlor. The final member of the group is Randy, an older boy, already in college, who continues to come to Sag Harbor in the summers. Randy has a car, which gives him a powerful position within the group. He uses this power to its full extent in the early part of the

summer, dictating who should get a ride and who should walk. However, when Bobby also gets a car Randy's power is diminished.

As a group, Benji and his friends learn about various things, for example, weapons and their dangers. The group start to become fascinated with BB guns. Several of the boys buy these non-letal air guns and start shooting at targets in their backyards and in the woods surrounding the beaches. One afternoon, the boys decide to have a BB war. They all agree on the rule that they should not shoot each other in the face, and that the rifle belonging to Randy should not be pumped more than twice. However, Randy fails to heed these rules and shoots Benji beside the eye, causing the BB to be lodged in his face for the rest of his life. Here, Whitehead hints that some of these boys will turn to real guns later in life, and the results will be even more tragic:

> As time went on we learned to arm ourselves in different ways. Some of us with real guns, some of us with more ephemeral weapons, an idea or improbable plan or some sort of formulation about how best to move through the world. An idea that will let us be. Protect us and keep us safe. But a weapon nonetheless. (158)

According to Derek C. Maus in *Understanding Colson Whitehead* (2014), the association between a stable identity and a weapon contradicts the fact that Benji and his peers do not feel any external threat in relation to the way they should act or be. However, Whitehead does describe the pressure that the boys feel as having its origins in racial dimensions.

Later on in the summer, a large concert is planned at a local night-club. The boys are all too young to go to the club, but they decide to try to gain entrance anyway. Benji buys a ticket and plans to dress like his white schoolmates back in New York in order to convince the bouncers that he is old enough. The schemes of his friends are busted when they try to get inside with a couple of cousins as their dates, but Benji and NP later get in without any trouble.

The handshake routine performed by Benji's friends Marcus and Bobby is described as the following: "[s]lam, grip, flutter, snap. Or was it slam, flutter, grip, snap? I was all thumbs when it came to shakes." (Whitehead, 43) Benji, who only perceives "a blur choreography" reasons: "I had all summer to get it right, unless

someone went back to the city and returned with some new variation that spread like a virus, and which my strong dork constitution produced countless antibodies against ."(ibid.) In short, Benji admits that his efforts to learn the new handshakes remain mere "fumbles." (ibid.) What's more, Benji imagines the handshakes to be "[d]evised in the underground soul laboratories of Harlem, pounded out in the blacker-than-thou sweatshops of the South Bronx," but this should not be misunderstood as suggesting that the handshakes express blackness. (ibid.) In fact, Benji imagines the white elite as "secret-handshake groups," which emphasizes the exclusion he feels both from the black urban culture and the white elite. (110) He considers this gesture as "black slang and other sundry soulful artifacts [he]'d missed out on in [his] 'predominantly white' private school." (29) Thus, he and his friends perform it only between themselves, and never in front of their parents. Another thing they avoid doing in front of their parents is making jokes about the Ku Klux Klan because these sorts of jokes are "a luxury of black privilege not afforded to their parents and grandparents.." (Fain, 129) As an example, they joke about a lighter skinned friend, Bobby Grant, claiming that he was so light that the Ku Klux Klan would avoid him if they were hunting for blacks.

Also in a racial context, Benji and his peers are aware of the negative meaning of the word "nigger" within the community and the effect this word has when used as a racial insult. This is why Benji criticizes how his parents' generation used that word with hypocrisy, for instance when he says that "there were no street niggers in Sag Harbor. No. No. No. But we all had cousins who...you know." (Whitehead, 39) What's more, Benji notices while watching his friends how they embrace codified modes of blackness, especially NP. It is clear that the boys are highly attracted by these representations of blackness. It is possible that the boys' opinions on race are distorted and exaggerated by cultural trafficking, but it is clear that race matters to them in terms of their identity.

Despite sharing modes of blackness with his friends, Benji feels excluded from his friends' hip-hop world, especially when his brother Reggie and his friend Bobby rap over a Run-DMC live performance recording. Benji reflects that he has been listening to "too much Buzzcocks. I thought I knew all of Run-DMC's records...but I was a square.." (Whitehead, 170) His unfamiliarity with the fashionable hip-hop world,

typical of the black boys his age serves to emphasize his isolation from his friends. Hip-hop does not only describe the music the boys are listening to, but also the performances they enact. Benji says that he already knows the whole Run-DMC discography, but Reggie and Bobby are able to perform the songs with the right attitude, a fact that makes Benji jealous: “In my jealousy, I saw Bobby and Reggie performing their bit behind the counter at Burger King, their clubhouse where I was not allowed..” (Whitehead, 171)

Whitehead does not portray the central issues of a black adolescent’s life, instead, he provides insights into how Benji’s growing up process can only be effective when influenced by his black friends, since these people are the only ones with whom he feels free to experiment and invent himself. Sonny is never with his family because of his bad behavior as a child, and Benji only sees his family during the weekends. As such, it is their relationships with their peers that provide both protagonists with a learning source and an opportunity to mature. The PVEST theory applies perfectly to peer relationships in *Manchild in the Promised Land*, but the same cannot be said about *Sag Harbor*. Rather, in relation to the influence of peer pressure specifically, the theory applies only sometimes. In fact, as it can be seen from Benji's story, he and his peers belong to a middle-class environment, but still face negative experiences and behave in controversial ways. This means that negative peer influences do not necessarily belong to low-resource environments, but can be found elsewhere. Moreover, the influence of peers influence becomes more powerful than that of parents, particularly when parents are absent. In Sonny’s case, he can only rely on the teachings of other adults outside of the family. For Benji and his friends, the supervision of their parents is entirely absent during their time at Sag Harbor.

The PVEST theory and its focus on African American boys does not apply in a significant way to Selina's life as an ethnic young woman in *Brown Girl, Brownstones.* Selina is clearly more influenced by her family background and her connection with other adults, and is less affected by her peers. Nevertheless, her connection with the latter helps her to embrace and understand the process of female puberty she is about to go through. Selina finds it difficult to identify with her older sister Ina, who is very representative of femininity. Despite this, she embraces the feminine world

through her relationship with her best friend Beryl. Beryl is one of six children and tries to be a good daughter and do what her father wants. For Selina, she is a source of comfort and soothes her anger: “[p]erhaps it is the way Beryl's thick braids rested quietly on her shoulders or the way her tiny breast nudged her middy blouse. They made Selina shy, those breasts, and ashamed of her shapelessness.” (Marshall, 15) Selina notices how feminine Beryl's body is compared with her own, and she “wished that her eyes could pierce Beryl's skin and roam inside her.” (ibid.) Furthermore, she enjoys it when she “grabbed her, remembering, and felt Beryl’s warmth rush into her.” (ibid.)

Once, Selina asks Beryl if she can accompany her to Prospect Park. When the two girls are watching the animals at the zoo, they start talking about Virgie, a pregnant neighbor, and how babies are born, since Selina is sure that women have their stomachs cut open. Beryl explains that the baby pops out, “underneath,” and then she tells Selina that she menstruates and that Ina does too. Selina feels left out and even betrayed by her mother who has not told her this secret. This scene at the park is emblematic, particularly because this moment of a shared secret is prefigured by a moment of physical intimacy when they are on their way to the park: “[t]heir hands met and Selina separated Beryl's fingers and meshed them with hers. Together, their hands closed into one fist, their bodies joined in a single rhythm, they skipped the three blocks to the Tompkins Avenue trolley.” (Marshall, 56) At this point, Selina's awareness of self is further problematized, especially because both girls have a lot of misinformation about puberty and reproduction. Beryl knows more, but even she claims that Selina will die if she does not menstruate before the age of twenty. Selina is confused about the giving birth process partly because Virgie has had a Cesarean section. For Selina, womanhood feels alien and she believes the process of menstruation and the arrival of feminity will never happen to her as it has for Beryl. As she says, “[i]t's never gonna happen to me.” (Marshall, 61) In this way, Selina demonstrates a refusal of her feminine self. She feels excluded from the women's world and denies that any feminine development could ever happen to her, as it has happened to the women surrounding her, including her mother, Beryl and Ina. As LeSeur states:

> Selina is physically immature (having a 'flat body' and long legs) and ignorant of menstruation, childbirth, and sex (she knows only that Ina is 'sick,' believes that babies must be cut out of a mother's stomach, and refuses to accept the truth as she hears it from her friend Beryl, because it threatens her own firmly rooted convictions) – all of which compounds her isolation from the familial unit that surrounds her. (111)

Selina feels excluded from her other Caribbean friends because she refuses to follow the wishes of her mother and her friends. What's more, both Beryl and Ina follow the community expectations of womanhood. Meanwhile, Selina, "in contrast to the meek, defeatist, complacent, quiescent, Ina […] takes a passionately active role in her relationship with life, in terms of the intensity of her feelings and desires her self-assertiveness, her iron will, her defiance, and her pride." (Marshall, ibid.)

In relation to the difference between peer and family influences, sociologists emphasize the fact that peers and families exert different kinds of influence, since peers mainly influence areas such as "delinquency, sexuality, or academic achievement." (Belgrave and Brevard, 41) Moreover, peer relationships "are more accepting and present-oriented than the more hierarchical and future-oriented parent-child relationship," which results in peers being considered as more trustworthy learning sources. On the other hand, some adolescents do not feel adequately accepted, or even negatively accepted, among their peers. In most cases, self-perceptions and peer interaction exert an influence on the choices the adolescent makes, such as academic, social, psychological and physical.

In a world where children spend most of their time with their peers, it is likely that the process of maturation depends mostly on daily group experiences. In many cases, they are not acquainted with the dangers of adult life through family relations, on the contrary, they experience them one by one, alone and at their own risk. For example, Sonny learns the negative effect drugs have on him and decides to avoid them in the future, while Benji learns that weapons can be dangerous while playing with BB guns with his friends. Furthermore, Sonny sees his friends "getting strung out" one by one from the side effects of drugs, which helps him to understand what constitutes a good in life and what does not. In this way, he begins his journey of

becoming a better man by understanding what is important in life, such as education. On the other hand, Selina feels ashamed and confused as she learns what it means to mature, and she realizes that she is not sure that she wants the same future that her parents want for her. It seems that peer behavior influences whether or not children will introduce themselves to drugs or risky sexual behaviors, as well as having an effect on academic achievements. The PVEST theory shows that peers serve as both positive and negative influences, particularly in relation to how African American boys living in a low-resource environment deal with challenges, as is the case with Sonny. In terms of the male gender, it is clear that having negative peer influences often leads to hyper-masculinity and risky behaviors, such as drug abuse. It is also clear that in these instances, peers may override the influence of parents.

Chapter IV: Finding One's Identity: The Authentic Version of Yourself

This final chapter aims to delineate how the three protagonists make choices about who they want to be. Based on my arguments in the two previous chapters, I will argue that the trajectory of each protagonist's development is not predetermined by skin color or place of birth, but by the way in which each takes control of his/her own life in order to build a positive identity. It is clear that Sonny and Benji identify themselves as African American while Selina identifies as Caribbean. I will argue that each protagonist is conflicted, not only because of the difficulties of embracing adult life, but also because of how they feel about their ethnic background in a predominantly white society. Eventually, each protagonist finds a way to resolve this conflict and to construct an authentic version of themselves.

4.1 Where does one run to when he's already in the promised land?: Finding yourself by leaving and then coming back

Sonny's story is characterized by his resistance to a life that seems predetermined by the color of his skin and the place he was born. He realizes that the only way to escape from Harlem is by taking control of his own life. As the narrator, Sonny is not concerned with constructing a way to avoid the ghetto life, rather he shows that it is possible to construct a positive identity within it. The introduction of the novel ends with the question "Where does one run to when he's already in the promised land ?" (Brown, xii) This sentence establishes the thematic basis on which the novel is built. As a child of southern-born African Americans who had migrated north after the Great Depression, Brown documents his childhood during the 1940s and 1950s, focusing on the themes of displacement and abandoned dreams. He portrays the generational conflict that resulted when parents tried to impose their own rural ways of survival on their children, who struggled with the different reality of the urban street. From Sonny's perspective, his parents are indelibly marked with their rural past, "Before the soreness of the cotton fields had left Mama's back, her knees were getting sore from scrubbing Goldberg's floor. Nevertheless, she was better off; she had gone from the fire into the frying pan." (Brown, 8)

In terms of the wider racial context of the novel, Brown's premise is that since the black man never belonged to the white man's promised land, the promises the land offers must be forfeited for other dreams and expectations. Brown seeks to legitimize the struggles of his parents and his own, in the foreword, when he situates his writings within the matrix of American history:

> I want to talk about the first Northern urban generation of Negroes. I want to talk about the experiences of a misplaced generation, of a misplaced people in an extremely complex, confused society. This is a story of their searching, their dreams, their sorrow, their small and futile rebellions, and their endless battle to establish their own place in America's greatest metropolis—and in America itself. (7)

Sonny's Harlem, after all, does not resemble a promised land; it is a kind of hell in which men, women, and children are devoured by their own vices. Drugs and crime offer an escape but also represent entrances into a lower level of Brown's inferno, while the white man's promised land shines somewhere out there in America, the land of opportunity and equality. Sonny's Harlem is a metaphor for the struggle of an entire race as the black community there in united in its struggle for identity, respect, and basic survival. Sonny's parents represent a defeated generation of African Americans who believed it was best to keep to one's place, and to be grateful to be allowed to live and work in a place like Harlem. Within this generation, however, there is a restless anger that shows itself both as a kind of displaced anger towards the coming generation and in the way in which it influences their children. Sonny and his peers do not know where they are going, but they are moving away from the complacency and decay of their parents into an age that, at the very last, will remember its rage:

> Going to New York was goodbye to the cotton fields, goodbye to 'Massa Charlie,' goodbye to the chain gang, and, most of all, goodbye to those sun up-to-sundown working hours. One no longer had to wait to get to heaven to lay his burden down; burdens could be laid down in New York. (Brown, xi)

One of the most significant things Sonny learns while growing up in Harlem is that education is far more powerful than the drugs, crime and violence. Through Mr. Papanek, he learns how to appreciate himself, and how developing intelligence

through education increases his sense of value. Mr. Papanek recognizes Sonny's potential, and shows him the way out, though it will be years before Sonny finally acts according to what he has learned. Education, Mr. Papanek demonstrates, is power: unlike fighting ability or drugs, it can never be taken away. Sonny knows that his only hope of escaping Harlem is to take control of his life, but for a young uneducated black man this is not an easy objective to achieve. When he finally risks his life and his identity, he faces the social barricades that stand in the way of his search for education and equality. What's more, he realizes that his childlike vision of Harlem as a dangerous playground has vanished forever, leaving behind the ugly realities of urban waste and human misery.

According to Henry Giroux, Brown conveys the idea that as a consequence of the violence and the dangerous day-by-day sort of living, adolescents in Harlem are deprived of both their childhood and their future:

> Childhood stolen became less a plea for self-help – that short-sighted and mendacious appeal that would define the reactionary reform efforts of the 80s and 90s – than a clarion call for condemning a social order that denied children a future. Even though Brown approached everyday life in Harlem more as a poet than as a political revolutionary, he embedded politics in every sentence in the book. Not a politics marked by demagoguery, hatred, and orthodoxy, but one that made visible the damage done by a social system characterized by massive inequalities and a rigid racial divide. Manchild created the image of a society without children in order to raise questions about the future of a country that turned its back on its most vulnerable population. (678)

For Giroux, the innocence of childhood was stolen as a result of the daily dangers of the street, whereby children were forced to learn how to defend themselves in situations where older generations could not intervene. The title of the novel itself is a metaphor because "Manchild" suggests a society in which young people become adults too soon, as Giroux says, "a society that is waging war on those children who are black and poor and have been forced to grow up too quickly." (ibid.) Moreover, in the "interiorized colony" of Harlem, whoever decided to rebel did not end up happy (ibid.). As Brown reminds us at the end of the book, "[i]t seemed as though most of the

cats that we'd come up with just hadn't made it. Almost everybody was dead or in jail." (Brown, 419) As for Sonny, he did not consider himself a rebel, neither did he have any kind of dream. As he says,

> Everybody I knew in Harlem seemed to have some kind of dream. I didn't have any dream. [...] I didn't have any dream of becoming anything. All I knew for certain was that I had my fears. I suppose just about everybody else knew the same thing. They had their dreams, though, and I guess that's what they had over me. As time went by, I was sorry for the people whose dreams were never realized. (Brown, 400-1)

The first decision Sonny makes is to dedicate himself to his own education, which means leaving Harlem. Despite this, Sonny feels an inner conflict, brought on by the fact that going to school does not change his sense of belonging to the street. Thus, he decides that he will never properly evolve until he leaves Harlem. Consequently, while living in Greenwich Village, he finds a state of inner peace, as he has nothing to prove to anybody and can erase for a moment his past on the street. Sonny then decides to give away his gun. He does not need to possess it to prove his value as a man; furthermore, he knows he is not going to kill anyone. His later initiation into the Coptic faith is a further demonstration of his need for an escape. Even though he considers religion to be deceptive, indulged in by weak people, who are taken advantage of, Sonny dedicates four months to studying and absorbing the Coptic doctrine. To begin with, Sonny has an insatiable appetite for knowledge and for investigating everything new. He shows this numerous times, in taking up the piano and attending the gym, for example. Sonny has a curious mind and wants to know why something is the way it is and why things work the way they do. This same spirit of investigation drives him to examine the Coptic faith. He is especially inquisitive when he realizes that his friend Billy Dobbs has changed because of the church, and despite his skeptical attitude, decides to try it. Another reason for Sonny's curiosity is his desire to escape. Sonny is, in fact, searching for a kind of void state whereby he can forget his past. Yet, he needs something more. That something, for the present, is the Coptic faith. The time and energy required to analyze, to study, and to learn a new language, leave him little occasion to brood about the past, about how his boyhood community changed.

Nevertheless, he starts to feel misplaced as he comes to realise that his faith to this new religion is not genuine since it does not work in practice. He cannot accept the beliefs of the Coptic church since he feels no real kinship to Africa. What's more, he learns that the Africans of the church do not accept American blacks, which to him is unconceivable. Sonny's assessment of the relationship between African blacks and American blacks is not unique. His explanation has deep roots. Essentially, Africans are proud of their heritage, while many American blacks are not. Some blacks from Africa have looked down upon their American counterparts because of the American black's slave heritage. In this sense, there is a parallel prejudice in the U.S because some African Americans feel superior to their African counterparts because of the image portrayed in the U.S of black Africa.

A whole chapter of the novel is dedicated to the Black Muslim movement, a political movement that played a central role in the history of black nationalism in the U.S.[22] As Sonny observes, "[a]ll I knew was that these cats were building up this black superiority thing. [...] At the same time, these guys were tearing down anything that was white. They seemed to resent the clouds for being white." (Brown, 303) Initially, Sonny sees the Muslims as just another phase of nationalism in Harlem; the tone seems to belittle its importance and also the importance of contributions to black self-esteem from men such as Marcus Garvey and others.[23] Garvey's contribution was the development of black pride at a time when it was badly needed. Few of his followers had any intention of really going back to Africa, but Garvey contradicted the prevailing idea that in the U.S. being black meant being inferior. In Sonny's opinion, another

[22] Started in 1913 with the founding of the Moorish Science Temple of America by Noble Drew Ali, the Black Muslim movement emphasized the unique "true religion" of the black community and its role in fighting white supremacy in the United States. Fusing religion and black nationalism, the movement influenced the Nation of Islam (NOI), which was founded in 1930 by W.D. Fard and sustained by Elijah Muhammed thereafter. NOI leader Malcolm X attracted national attention, but also received criticism for promoting black supremacy. It remains a controversial, but unique movement in African-American history.

[23] Marcus Mosiah Garvey Jr. (17 August 1887 – 10 June 1940) was a Jamaican-born leader, publisher, journalist, entrepreneur, and orator. He was President of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL), Which aimed for the African Americans to return in the African continent. He was also President of the Black Star Line, a shipping and passenger line founded in Delaware. The Black Star Line went bankrupt and Garvey was imprisoned for mail fraud in the selling of its stock. Soon after, the movement rapidly collapsed. In the 60s the Nation of Islam, on which Malcolm X was the spokesman, continued this early tradition.

movement will replace the Muslims as an outlet for black frustration. We must remember, however, why Sonny cannot believe in the Muslims, or in any other religious power: as a pragmatic individual, he can see many fallacies in the doctrine. For Sonny, the test of what the Muslims say about their beliefs is contradicted by what can be proved.

The first of his friends to whom he talks at length about the faith is Floyd Saks. Floyd appears to be openly racist. He adopts the familiar phrases that racist preach, such as, we can hate and mistreat other groups because we are superior beings; we can assign all wrong and evil to one side or group; all the important knowledge and all the important historical personages come from our racial stock. Only a short time earlier, Floyd Saks considered himself to be inferior. However, it is well known that traditional racists are quick to convince themselves that they are of superior stock. In truth, Floyd Saks is giving vent to his anger and frustration through black hate. Sonny sees black hate as being just as bad as white hate. In Sonny's view, a man cannot control his color; therefore, it should not be held against him. Floyd argues that religion has been used to keep blacks in line, while the whites violate every principle to their own advantage. Note that Sonny does not categorically refute this argument; in speaking about the movement, he tells Floyd that he is not yet sold on the idea. From what we know about Sonny's character, he probably agrees with Floyd's remarks about religion. What Sonny has not been sold on, however, is the Muslims' prescription that action will resolve the problems. Moreover, Sonny sees Floyd substituting one form of racism for another. The strongest attack on Sonny and his newly acquired value system comes from Alley Bush, a gang member who later becomes a Black Muslim. Alley issues a call for revolution and considers Sonny to be a complacent person who has 'made it'. Incredibly, many people in the black middle class hold precisely this view and have absolutely no sympathy for their lower-class brothers. They are, in fact, much more severe in their criticism of lower-class behavior than they are of whites. Sonny realizes that, in a way, this is just what he is doing, making it. But he also knows that he is still interested in his fellow Harlemites, and he does try to help them find a way to work within the framework of the present political structure.

It is clear that Sonny cannot accept violence as the ultimate solution to the problems of the black man. For him, violence only achieves martyrdom. He makes it plain that he wants no part in hopeless causes that make use of violence. His rebellious days as a bebopper and a thief have convinced him that there must be a more noble way of attaining manhood. He sees leaving Harlem as the first essential step in improving his situation. He later realizes that leaving the ghetto is not enough. One must be prepared to contribute something to society. He has no intention of leaving Harlem to wait tables at Hamburger Heaven, nor would he suggest this solution to his friends. Sonny's solution seems to be this: prepare to do something that has dignity, something of worth, and then present oneself to the rest of society. Alley Bush feels that Sonny is complacent because he has not learned to be angry. The truth is, however, that Sonny is angry. He reacts to the indignities of being black in a society run by whites, just as any other black man does, but Sonny makes the decision to channel his anger into productive paths. Even though Sonny cannot accept the teachings of the Muslim movement, he does see a need for the group. He credits the movement for helping bring together different shades of black, such as Alley Bush and Floyd Saks, who call themselves black but are in fact light-skinned. Sonny also admires the fact that members of the faith acquire property, provide good services in business, and give much-needed jobs to black people.

Sonny categorizes the people he sees on the street. There are those who have no purpose, who wander aimlessly through life, and there are those who have been successful in white society and see a great need for change. This latter group is more likely to be prime candidates for the Black Muslim faith, or any other movement calling for immediate change. Sonny remarks, "If they don't do any more than let the nation know that there are black men in this country who are dangerously angry, then they've already served a purpose." (Brown, 337) Garvey's organization is very powerful at the beginning of the century, but in Sonny's day, this is not the case. Sonny is not interested in the Black Muslim movement, but it certainly influences him.

Later on in the novel, after the dissolution of Sonny's relationship with Judy, the white middle-class girl he had a relationship with, he feels the need to return to Harlem. He feels misplaced in Greenwich Village and that he has nothing to offer.

What's more, he believes that his attempt to integrate himself into the white world is a mistake, a realisation that is brought about by the failure of his last relationship. He returns to Harlem a different person after realizing that the "white world", that of the Village, is not as welcoming as he thought. Once he arrives back in Harlem, he realizes that other young men like him succeeded in overcoming the dangers of the street by remaining there, contrary to his approach of leaving. The Harlem he finds when he returns is the same as before. He then takes on a job as a salesman, which is a way of making money honestly without the need to return to street life. He feels stronger since he has nothing to prove to anyone and his values in life have changed.

The character of Sonny sustains the stereotype of the black man as virile and someone who fights whenever he needs to. Throughout his journey, Sonny realizes that leaving the ghetto is not enough, one has to contribute to society by offering something of worth. Sonny never hides his intention to better himself. Even when he goes to prison, he accepts it because he knows it might be an escape from the street life of Harlem. As he says, "I used to feel that I belonged on the Harlem streets and that, regardless of what I did, nobody had any business to take me off the streets."(Brown, 402) At the end of the autobiography, Sonny returns to Harlem after four years of absence, but he is now part of the new black middle class; therefore there is no way back for him to the street life. Even if Sonny's life is a success in the end, the sense of hopelessness in Harlem is still pervasive. However, as Sonny learns, personal happiness is about one's attitude and approach to life, as he says, "I guess all it takes to be happy in anything is knowin' how to walk with your lot, whatever it is, in life." (Brown, 399)

The novel demonstrates how Sonny manages to make something of himself without falling victim to the many dangers that destroyed the lives of many of his friends, even though he seems to be poorly equipped for success in the traditional American mold. It is clear that Sonny has a fighting spirit: he starts playing hockey almost as soon as he starts going to school, becomes an accomplished thief before the age of ten, and is constantly involved in street fights. As he recounts, "[b]y the age of nine years old, I had been hit by a bus, thrown into the Harlem River (intentionally), hit by a car, severely beaten with a chain. And I had set the house afire." (Brown, 21) He

seems destined for a violent end, but he manages to endure and ultimately changes his fate. Sonny is clearsighted enough to realize that there is a feasible alternative to his present way of life; that his destiny is not inevitable. During his final stay in reform school he recounts,

> I knew I wasn't going to finish high school, I didn't even know anybody who had finished high school. Cats around my way just didn't do that. It wasn't for me; it was for some other people that high school business. (Brown, 149)

Although at this point he has returned to dealing drugs and running various con games, he decides that perhaps high school is for him after all. He is resolute enough to be able to make a decision to break free from street life, despite pressure from his parents and his peers. He can withstand it because he has long since established his independence from his parents and is also independent from his friends since he is experienced in street life and has risen to the top of the street hierarchy. Sonny may not be a success in the traditional American mold, but he is in the environment in which he grows up in, according to the rules of the game as it is played there. He is a success is the sense that he is fearless, a good fighter, and an accomplished thief. According to the code of the streets, he deserves respect. What's more, he no longer has to worry about establishing his reputation or his manhood, and has the freedom to do what he wants, even to break away from the world without having to worry about what others might say. As he says, "I didn't have to prove anything anymore, because I'd been proving myself for years and years and years." (Brown, 260) Although Harlem's potential to destroy lives is obvious to Sonny, he still sees some positive influences. As he says, "despite everything that Harlem did to our generation, I think it gave something to a few. It gave them a strength that couldn't be obtained anywhere else." (407) Indeed, Pimp, Sonny's brother, falls into heroin addiction and crime because, in Sonny's view, he was a "good boy" who missed the toughening experiences Sonny had gone through on the streets and was thus rendered incapable of resisting the pressures he encountered once he left the house and went out on his own. (270) Towards the end of the book, Brown extols the educational influence of the Harlem streets, saying that he learned lessons that were far more valuable than anything he ever learned in the classroom.

4.2. I'm a Geek: Finding that your Blackness is enough

Having described how in *Manchild In the Promised Land* Sonny discovered who he wanted to be by leaving Harlem and then returning, I will now consider how, during his summer in Sag Harbor, Benji will find out that, despite society demands, his identity as a black boy is enough for him to feel like his true self. Benji grows up in a privileged world that is predominantly white. In school he "was used to be the only black kid in the room" and so, often felt that he was surrounded by people with which he could not identify. At Sag Harbor, he is taken out of that white world and enters into a world with children with similar experiences to his own:

> [a]ccording to the world we were the definition of paradox: black boys with beach houses. A paradox to the outside, but it never occurred to us that there was anything strange about it. It was simply who we were, what you call paradox, I call myself. (Whitehead, 57)

At Sag Harbor he feels he can be himself, feeling that "[i]t was nice to have a team." (6) Despite his early school experiences of alienation, he seems later not to have serious problems concerning his identity, as he says, "I was one of those dullards who thought that 'Just be yourself' was the wisdom of the ages, the most calming piece of advice I have ever heard, and acted accordingly." (23) All of his former problems are still visible at Sag Harbor, however, as he realizes he "was just being [himself], and [he] was just being avoided."(24) Despite his friends themselves being nerdy, Benji still feels as though he should hide his interest in horror films and the game Dungeons and Dragons because he fears the opinions of others. The interweaving of black middle-class and pop culture gives Benji an opportunity to shape his identity while confounding him even more. When Benji and his friends go swimming, Whitehead (80) uses a simile to describe Benji's sense of abandoning his identity and therefore entering into a wider experience:

> [l]etting my body go, as if I didn't have a body at all and there was no barrier between me and the sea, while waiting for one of my friends to flip me over or pull me under, because that's what friends do, but if I could get a few minutes alone out of the world I was happy.

Benji has low self-esteem, describing himself as “the person you made out with to make someone pity you, like, look how far I've fallen since you left me, what with the far-off stare and general air of degradation.” (Whitehead, 250) Elsewhere he reflects, “[w]hat was the point? […] Move. Don’t move. Act. Don’t act. The results were the same. This was my labyrinth.” (106) He does begin, however, to see through some of these misconceptions, and by the end of the summer has begun to look at himself differently, and stops being afraid to show his real self. Since the beginning of the novel, Benji differentiates his identity from that of his twin brother Reggie: “[a]s fake twins, we couldn't shake our love of the uniform. Each day we wore the same make of short, but different colors, different iron-on decals.” (Whitehead, 5) In fact, it was their differences that they identified with most of all, “it was to that crooked little corner of difference that we truly aspired.” (ibid.) He believes Reggie is “cooler” than him because he is not as nerdy as him. Despite their differences, Benji and Reggie are both from an economically advantaged and privileged background, which enables them “to escape the constraints of their domestic sphere and to presume their own entitlement to mobility within the public sphere.” (Fain, 134) Moreover, Benji knows that the power of education may provide safety in the public sphere.

An important theme throughout the novel is how the main characters identify themselves as black, as Benji says,

> Everybody had their brands, black kids, white kids. Sperry, Girbaud and Benetton, Lee jeans and Le Tigre polos, according to the plumage theory of social commerce. If the correct things belonged to you, perhaps you might belong. (Whitehead, 45)

Benji and his friends enjoy a summer of fun and adventure but repeatedly remark on the question of race. Benji recounts the way people once became obsessed with tracking down and watching the few black faces on television, just prior to the advent of shows that eventually led to the highly successful *The Cosby Show*. Later, Benji discusses the black stereotype of a man walking down the street carrying a watermelon. In time, the reader comes to realize that this perceived prejudice is a part of who these young men are and who they will become:

> [y]ou didn’t, for example, walk down Main Street with a water-melon under your arm. Even if you had a pretty good reason. Like, you were going to a potluck and

> each person had to bring an item and your item just happened to be a watermelon, luck of the draw, and you wrote this on a sign so everyone would understand the context, and as you walked down Main Street you held the sign in one hand and the explained watermelon in the other, all casual, perhaps nodding between the watermelon and the sign for extra emphasis if you made eye contact. This would not happen. We were on display. You'd add cover purchases, as if you were buying hemorrhoid cream or something, throw some apples into the basket, a carton of milk, butter, some fucking saltines, and all smiles at the register. (Whitehead, 88)

The research of Belgrave and Brevard describes the three stages of ethnic identity as the unexamined stage, the exploration stage, and the achieved stage. The unexamined stage is concerned with "internalized beliefs and attitudes" of a particular group of white participants. (19) The exploration stage happens when people "begin to explore the meaning of their ethnic group membership in relation to the dominant culture", while the achieved stage occurs when they "have heightened awareness of being African American and have achieved their identity and are comfortable with it."(ibid.) The older Benji who narrates the novel takes a satirical stance on the behavior of both African American and white people in an emerging post-racial world: "[t]here were no street niggers in Sag Harbor […] But we all had cousins who... you know." (31) Here, Benji is referring obliquely to the drug dealing activity of many African Americans that contrary to him are living in dangerous neighborhoods. With the same satirical spirit, he focuses on the ridiculousness of the stereotypes that he heard during his working days at the ice-cream parlor:

> there must have been creatures of such affluence that I can not even speculate about their day-to-day, [...]The exact shape of their bodies, the number of gills in their neck and and suckers on their mottled digits, I cannot say, because in order to mingle with Earth people they needed to wear human-flesh costumes, for only then could they walk among us, and of course eventually they came through the doors of Jonni Waffle like all the rest, like all of us, and I served them ice cream. (Whitehead, 113)

Stereotypes aside, the formation of Benji's personal identity is conditioned by the representations and shared beliefs of what is considered to be "authentic blackness."

Race does matter for Benji, to the extent to which he tries to establish to which cultural classification he belongs. “Race is the answer to all questions. Know who you are racially, and you know what to do.” (Japtok, 140) Among the various representations of blackness, however, many appear in opposition. Benji is confused as he does not know how to be the stereotypical black boy that society demands. That is why he believes that in Sag Harbor, where he is surrounded only by his friends, he can learn from them and perhaps fit in. Despite his intentions, he often feels out of place. What’s more, his problem is not like Sonny’s; it is not a fear of rejection or a concern about not being good enough, rather, he thinks he is not black enough. In *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What It Means to be Black Now (2011)* Touré introduces this concept as follows:[24]

> To be born Black is an extraordinary gift bestowing access to an unbelievably rich legacy of joy. […] To experience the full possibilities of Blackness, you must break free of the strictures sometimes placed on Blackness from outside the African American culture and also from within it. (4)

Touré’s understanding of blackness suggests novelty and diversity, fluidity and experimentation. One should never feel restricted by blackness, on the contrary, one should believe that there are infinite possibilities. He also suggests that there is no single way of being authentically black. Touré describes the three primary dimensions of blackness according to Dyson, namely the accidental, incidental, and intentional, but Touré prefers to rename them as introverted, ambiverted, and extroverted. The first dimension refers to a “more private relationship with Blackness,” as Dyson says it's “I'm an American, I'm a human being, I happen to be Black. By accident of my birth I am Black. It just happened that way.” (9) The second dimension is a more fluid relationship with the issue, where “blackness is an important part of them but does not necessarily dominate their persona.” (ibid.) Dyson reports that those who have this state of mind better embrace blackness as they do not try to avoid it, neither do they consider it the whole of their existence. Finally, the intentional or extroverted blackness, whereby a

[24] Touré was born in 1971 in the U.S. He is a writer, music journalist, cultural critic, and television personality. He is the author of several books, including *The Portable Promised Land* (2003), *Soul City* (2005), *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means To Be Black Now* (2011) and *I Would Die 4 U: Why Prince Became an Icon* (2013).

person has made being black the main reason of their lives. In this category, he mentions personalities such as Malcolm X, Dr. King, Jim Brown and Jay-Z to name a few. (ibid.) Touré's work also promotes his idealized concept of a "Post-Black era," in which blackness' boundaries and definitions are exploded in multiple possibilities. His concept of "Post-Blackness," that is to say "a modern individualistic Blackness," encourages novelty and diversity, fluidity and experimentation. (12) He states, "Post-Blackness is not a box, it's an inbox. It opens the door to everything. It's open-ended and open-sourced and endlessly customizable. It's whatever you want to be" (ibid.) He then adds that this conveys the idea that "we are rooted in, but not restricted, by Blackness." (ibid.) His idea endorses the fact that there is not an authentic way to be black because the possibilities are infinite. Consequently, he underlines the distinction between post-black and "post-racial," where the latter excludes the existence of race and reasons beyond it while suggesting colorblindness, whereas the former suggests black people's existence has its roots in blackness, but at the same time this does not restrict their life possibilities. (Touré, ibid.)

In *Colson Whitehead: the postracial voice of contemporary literature (2015)* Kimberly Fain suggests that *Manchild in the Promised Land* distinguishes itself from *Sag Harbor* because it describes "the horror of being black and enslaved or segregated or impoverished or imprisoned" (127) while Whitehead's protagonist lives in a post-civil rights era, with class advantages. As a result, Benji is not "assaulted by life" but life offers him "the opportunity to figure out his identity and who he wants to be in life." Therefore, during his summer in Sag Harbor, Benji stops pretending to be who he is not, and he stops following a model, and ends up embracing the person he is, which results in him feeling less anguish. Benji soon realizes that he is fine the way he is and comes to accept his nerdiness while dismissing his feelings of not being black enough. As Touré suggests, there is no one way to be black, but there are many millions. As a college student, Benji recounts the moment he discovered W.E.B. Du Bois' doctrine of double-consciousness:[25]

[25] William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was an American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, Pan-Africanist, author, writer and editor. He is known to be one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, and the first African-American to earn a doctorate at Harvard University. He was the leader of the Niagara Movement, a group of African-American activists who wanted equal rights for blacks. His protest was mainly against racism, lynching,

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. (5)

Benji refers to the author, saying, "[t]he guy who wrote that was chowing fried fish behind my house." (Whitehead, 18) He comes to understand from Du Bois that African Americans must struggle to reconcile their outward existence in the white world with their desire to be authentically black. He also understands that double-consciousness limits self-consciousness to the extent that one feels bound to look at oneself through the eyes of others. Benji does not feel he has the same double consciousness, while Du Bois believed that everyone is divided into what they are and what people think they are. Benji is interested by this because he thinks he knows who he really is, but he expected to be someone else, so he would like to be that someone else again.

Benji has a persistent feeling of not being "black enough," as he is not able to perform black culture and as he himself admits he "was a square." (Whitehead, 170) He feels a kind of doubleness that has similarities with what Du Bois says, "[t]his waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand people...and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves" (DuBois, 3). As Benji says, "[i]f I had enough information I might know how to be" (Whitehead, 68). This quotation refers to both his teenage confusion and his displacement as a black boy in a

Jim Crow laws, discrimination in education and employment.

predominantly white society. Benji's difficulty in finding his own identity seems to have its origins in the fact that he lives by someone else's standards. Only by disregarding these standards will he be able to define his own self. He is used to seeing himself through the eyes of others. Ultimately, for Benji to truly be himself, he must accept everything that he is without excluding any part of his self, to demonstrate that it is possible to lead a healthy life by being both black and American.

3.3. That was all she was, she did not belong here: Finding yourself by reconciling with your origins

Selina is the most radical among the three protagonists because she is the one who effects the biggest changes, particularly when she decides to walk away from New York and go back to Barbados. At the beginning of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Selina is a confused ten-year-old who has trouble finding her proper place in life. By the end of the book, she has faced the death of her father, and has decided to leave college to make her own way alone in the world as a dancer. She learns to face who she is, including admitting how much she is like her mother, and she also makes the adult decision not to follow in her mother's unscrupulous footsteps. Immediately after Selina relinquishes the Association scholarship, she understands that she has set herself free since she no longer relies on her support network, and her success or failure is up to her. As the narrator says, "as the familiar faces fell away behind her, she was aware of the loneliness coiled fast around her freedom." (Marshall, 303) In *Souls Looking Back: Life Stories of Growing Up Black* (2002) Andrew Garrod et al argue that

> [c]ultural and racial socialization for black children, particularly those of biracial heritage, is complicated by such factors as their phenotypical characteristics (e.g., skin color, hair, and facial features), and the levels of parents' racial identity development. (xxv)

A representation of this can be seen in Selina's life in that she feels condemned to be what she is not, what her mother and people surrounding her want her to be. From the outset, Selina is characterized as having the maturity of a young woman, her eyes

> were not the eyes of a child. Something too old lurked in their centers. They were weighted, it seemed, with scenes of a long life. She might have been old once and now, miraculously, young again—but with the memory of that other life intact. (Marshall, 2)

She feels ashamed and confused as she learns what it means to grow up, and she is not sure that she wants the same future that her parents want for her. Despite this, she builds up a powerful personality by herself and thanks to the Bajan community surrounding her.

Her community plays an important role in shaping her positive self-image since it values educational and life successes more than physical aspects. Later, when she attends college, Selina discovers that she is a great dancer, and she uses this ability to make her way in the world. Later, she also experiences racism and begins to understand why many women she knows are so bitter, and why people from the West Indies feel the need to band together. Despite her independence, Selina is similar to her mother in that she is capable not just of hurting others with the use of words, but she can also easily deceive those around her, such as when she decides to win the Association scholarship so that she can run away with the money. Much of Selina's adolescence is spent trying to reconcile her adult impulses with the childish impulses inside of her. She demonstrates that, ultimately, she can reject those parts of her personality that she hates so much in her mother, and gives up the scholarship, even though she offends many of her family friends by doing so.

Selina lives in a community in which the maximum aspiration is buying a house. In the first chapter, the narrator says that “[t]he West Indians, especially the Barbadians who had never owned anything perhaps but a few poor acres in a poor land, loved the houses with the same fierce idolatry as they had the land on their obscure islands.” (Marshall, 4) Many in the community had experienced poverty, lack of education, and a language barrier, which led to them forming small communities or groups like that of the Barbadian Association to find a family within those who share the same culture. As Cecil Osborne says to the other West Indians at the Association meeting, “[m]ost of us did come to this man country with only the strength in we hand and a little learning we head and had to make our way, but the young people have the

opportunity to be professional and get out there and give these people big word for big word."(Marshall, 221) Surely, children of immigrant who have struggled cannot compare their lives to that of their parents, which is probably why they are not able to recognize their sacrifices, what's more, these children tend to be Americanized, to the extent that they do not always wish what their parents wish for them.

In Selina's case, the dominant culture makes her feel invisible: she is not light-skinned enough to be fully part of it, literally "non-existent-- a dark intruder in their glittering inaccessible world." (Marshall, 213) No one is willing to see her for who she is as a woman, instead she is seen for the color of her skin, and therefore as a southern and poor West Indian girl. Mrs. Benton, the white mother of one of the girls from Selina's dance troupe, plays an important role in terms of her feelings of displacement. When she talks to her, for the first time she understands that some people look down on her for being dark skinned. Mrs. Benton is very insistent on wanting to classify her, by asking for her origins and where she lives. Selina's strong character allows her to refuse being categorized in this way, as she says that she believes the other people's "idea of her was only an illusion."(Marshall, 291) What's more, she believes she will "find a way for her real face to emerge." (Marshall, ibid.) As a result, she finds a way to make her existence noticed and escapes from the shadows by moving to Barbados and shining under the spotlights of the dance stage, so that "the light cascaded down and formed a protective ring around her." (Marshal, 280) Nevertheless, the price to pay to be known as an individual was isolation, because her willingness to emerge made her lose the protection of a community, "as the familiar faces fell away behind her, she was aware of the loneliness coiled fast around her freedom." (Marshall, 303) She refuses the life that is expected of her by her community and chooses to follow her dreams:

> [s]he attempts to affirm her own identity as separately and distinctly hers, not with a vehemence that wants to establish the validity of her own existence. She wants to 'bring someone running' in order to confirm her 'self,' and to make her existence known and important to the external world. (LeSeur, 111)

In this way, her decision to move to Barbados results in the emergence of her black identity.

Before she experiences it for herself, Selina is not aware that racism even exists. Margaret's mother's racist attitudes towards her makes her realize that no

matter how successful she can be in life, she will always be seen and stereotyped as black from a white perspective, as if the color of her skin represented her whole identity. As the narrator says, “[a]bove all, the horror was that she saw in that image – which had the shape and form of her face but was not really her face – her own dark depth.” (Marshall, 251) In this scene, she sees in the woman's eyes the reflection of the negative image of her black skin. Nevertheless, the young girl decides that she

> must somehow prevent it from destroying her inside and find a way for her real face to emerge. Rubbing her face against the ravaged image in the glass, she cried in outrage: that along with the fierce struggle of her humanity she must also battle illusions. (Marshall, 252)

She then explains her mother's harsh behavior and feels admiration towards her people, confessing that

> [t]hey no longer puzzled or offended her. Instead, their purposefulness – charging the air like a strong current – suddenly charged her strength and underpinned her purpose. The tightness in her chest eased and her heart calmed. (Marshall, 262)

These two different experiences of the world outside the home and outside of Selina's ethnic community, together with the incident of racism, play an important role in developing her ethnical awareness.

In the dance environment, Selina learns for the first time “the full meaning of her black skin” and how much it represents her own identity. (Marshall, 289) Moreover, she becomes aware that she embodies a human threat to the white community. She will soon accept and embrace her racial identity for what it is without believing in its evil potential as the white community does. LeSeur suggests that Selina judges her physical self through a “White lens.”(110) She cannot accept her blackness because it does not respect the standards of white beauty. Whenever she looks at herself in the mirror, she realizes who she really is, “only herself.” (Marshall, 3) As such, she starts feeling out of place living in a refined white house (LeSeur, 110). She once realizes that she does not fit in when she sees that she does not appear in a family portrait, which leads to her desire to emerge as a distinct person, different from the baby brother she apparently replaced and who her mother still desires. She is angered whenever her

mother talks to her as if she was him, “I keep telling you I'm not him. I'm me. Selina. And there's nothing wrong with my heart”(Marshall, 40) The first step in her self-discovery is to begin admiring her mother, with whom she always had a very distant relationship. Secondly, she intends to discover the lost Bajan culture with which she feels a sense of belonging. She then intends to return to America to better her life.

Initially, Selina rejects everything that she associates with Black Barbadian womanhood. The power of her sexual awareness can be seen in her envious behavior towards her schoolmate's sexual awakening, and in her relationship with Clive. The protagonist's growing maturity can be seen in the way she changes her attitude towards her sister's Ina, she even apologizes and “wished that she could summon more eloquent words to ask forgiveness for all her abuse.” (Marshall, 252) Later on, she becomes aware that to understand herself she must understand her mother first. At Beryl's party, she notices that her maturity goes way beyond that of those her age because of the experiences she has had, such as the death of her father. Therefore, she is not ashamed to ask Beryl to dance, even if two girls dancing together is not the usual behaviour. As she explores herself, she grows in confidence:

> She was happy that for the first time she was living at a pitch and for a purpose. Alone at night, she visualized her mind as a faceted crystal or gem mounted on a pivot. Each facet was a simple aspect of herself, each one suited to a different role (Marshall, 30).

Selina starts to develop a sense of real pride for her own life as she finds a way to express her creativity through dancing:

> She was seeing, clearly for the first time, the image which the woman – and the ones like the woman – saw when they looked at her. What Clive had said must be true. Her dark face must be confused in their minds with what tthey feared most: with the night, symbol of their ancient fears, which seethed with sin and harbored violence, which spawned the beast in its fen; with the heart of darkness within them and all its horror and fascination. [...] Like the night, she was to be feared, spurned, purified- and always reminded of her darkness. (Marshall, 251)

Martin Japtok in his work *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction* suggests that *Brown*

Girl, Brownstones seeks for “a definition of ethnicity somewhere between 'Barbadian,' 'African American,' and 'American.'” (104) As explained before, Selina tries to establish her position within her ethnic group, demonstrating that there are countless possibilities for being ethnic. Japtok suggests that the traits that Selina dislikes in her community are responses to her socio-economic group, and because this novel does not see ethnicity in essentialist terms, she is not forced to decide between individualism and ethnicity, even though those choices present themselves in the plot. Nevertheless, Selina is not depicted as a betrayer in the case that she would adhere to individualism, even though it can be seen as such. (Japtok, 106) Rather, the protagonist rebels against the expectations of ethnic identity, but later ends up in a sort of reconciliation with her community. Moreover, the novel does “adhere in part to the individualistic plotline of the Bildungsroman yet revise[s] that model to accommodate the notion of ethnic solidarity." (Japtok, 107) Moreover, it criticizes and celebrates its ethnic community. What results in Selina’s sense of identity is “a reluctant but inescapable hybridity.” (ibid.) As Japtok argues, the novel

> explore[s] the potential of coercion behind the notion of ethnic solidarity [...] Ironically, the novel critique of coercive ethnic solidarity brings [it] closer to the ideology of individualism, which is both a feature of “Americanism” and a mainstream nationalist self-definition the ethnic community finds itself excluded from. At the same time, individualism is a feature of the traditional Bildungsroman and autobiography model that ethnic works often revise. (116)

Rather than being a response to the traditional Bildungsroman, this novel converses with its ethnic revision. Marshall does not have to define ethnic solidarity and communalism, but she starts from those notions in order to justify the consequent influence of individualism. As a consequence, she creates “a new conceptualization of ethnicity in the process, fusing America and ethnicity as they do the Bildungsroman with ethnic nationalism.” (Japtok, 133) What’s more, the plot suggests that ethnic ties are what makes it difficult for the protagonist to escape from her ethnicity completely. Finally, this Bildungsroman tries to “establish the ethnic individual while maintaining group coherence and attempt to counter stereotypes by forming a positive, while often normative, image of ethnicity.” (Japtok, 154)

Finally, it is important to consider the question, what difference is there between the experience of growing up as an ethnic boy and that of an ethnic girl? According to LeSeur in her work *Ten is the age of darkness: The black Bildungsroman*, the author's point of view plays a significant role in this, especially in the case of a woman writing about a girl as in the case of Paule Marshall. (LeSeur, 4) LeSeur also describes the so-called “second bildungsroman” (5) as the moment when one approaches puberty, which she considers on the same level as starting a job or taking further education and leaving home in search of a growing experience. The author of this study about the black Bildungsroman agrees that coming-of-age novels with young boys as protagonists “seek experience in a conscious attempt to cultivate inner powers” so that they should understand what the main values in society are and in so doing "construct a morality and philosophy of life from the bottom up." (13) This means that developing one’s own personality is inadequate, it has to be combined with a reconciliation of one’s self in terms of the political and social conditions of society. The Bildungsroman will only conclude positively following this procedure, which is not often the case in Bildungsromans with black boys as protagonists.

CONCLUSION

The Bildungsroman came into being at the end of the Eighteenth Century, having Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (1795)* as its prototype. The novel exemplifies the main features of the traditional novel of formation: it is a story about the maturation of the protagonist, starting from childhood, through adolescence and concluding in adulthood. What made this literary genre especially appealing as a new mode of cultural expression was the series of events that constituted the coming-of-age of the protagonist, including the obstacles and events that once overcome could help him/her to better him/herself and could eventually lead to the protagonist acquiring a role within society. Traditionally, the Bildungsroman is concerned with issues related to leaving home, family issues, love relationships, and relationship with the peers. Considering the tradition of the Bildungsroman, a comparative analysis of three novels has been carried out, which demonstrates their value as Ethnic Bildungsromans. The central question of this dissertation is: in which ways do *Manchild in the Promised Land (1965)*, *Sag Harbor (2009),* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones (1989)* represent examples of Ethnic Bildungsromans, and how do these features correspond with the traditional Bildungsroman?

The three novels in question are concerned with traditional aspects of the Bildungsroman, such as dysfunctional families, peer and societal influences, and identity formation. That said, these three novels are fundamentally concerned with an ethnic point of view that is not a component of the traditional Bildungsroman. Specifically, they are concerned with the identity formation of African American children, which differs from that of white children in the U.S. In each of the three novels, the authors emphasize the importance of racial, cultural, and historical factors in determining the identity of the protagonist. In *Manchild in the Promised Land* and in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, the protagonist is able to detach from his/her community, yet his/her ethnic ties will not allow him/her to feel completely free. This is not the case in *Sag Harbor*, in which Benji eventually overcomes his feelings of not being "black enough" and enjoys the freedom of being himself regardless of ethnic ties.

Following the model of the traditional Bildungsroman, the protagonists are introduced as immature, naive and innocent, but with a desire to learn and develop their sensibility, imagination, and intelligence. It is not by staying at home that they succeed in constructing a new sense of self. Both Sonny and Selina leave their homes, while Benji discovers who he is during his summer holiday away from the supervision of adults at Sag Harbor. Furthermore, each of the protagonists do not learn about themselves at school, instead they undergo various life experiences outside of the classroom. In one way or another, all three protagonists have complicated family relationships (with both parents and siblings). As such, each finds a kind of mentor whom they can rely on and whose help will guide them through their journey of personal development. In Sonny's case, he relies on the guidance of Mr. Papanek, who teaches him the power of education. In Benji's case, he reads W. E. B. Du Bois, which gives him a sense of perspective and understanding in terms of his own concerns about blackness. For Selina, she finds a mentor in Suggie, a Barbadian woman who broadens her understanding of what it means to be an ethnic woman. For each protagonist, towards the end of the coming-of-age process, they acquire a life philosophy that prepares them for dealing with life's difficulties.

By contrast to the traditional Bildungsroman, these ethnic coming-of-age stories portray a kind of reversal in terms of the relationship between society and the protagonist. In the traditional Bildungsroman, the protagonist eventually accepts the social values of the dominant society and make them his/her own. However, in the three novels examined here, the dominant society is portrayed as corrupt, what is more, the norms imposed by their own community are suffocating and not negotiable. Racism and hypocrisy are the diseases that make it difficult for the protagonists to internalize the dominant society's values. In this way, each of the three novels transgresses the borders of the traditional Bildungsroman thereby expanding the genre.

In Sonny's case, his objective is to be happy with who he is, and he is cautious of being too influenced by his peers (many of whom die young or are sent to jail). What's more, he does not want to end up like his father, who does not seem happy with the life he leads (he betrays his wife, mistreats his children, and looks for unhealthy ways

to escape from his daily routine during the weekends). For Benji, at least in the beginning, he is more influenced by what the others think about him, and is concerned about looking cool in their eyes, while hiding who he really is (a nerd; a fan of Dungeons and Dragons). Selina does not want the same future her parents want for her and she decides to pursue an independent life as a dancer. She is more concerned with feeling good with herself with being aware of her ethnicity's power in the world. As a result, she decides to move back to Barbados to find that part of herself she cannot locate in New York.

Bearing in mind the different life experiences of the three protagonists, their varying behaviors and approaches to self-realization should not come as a surprise. In fact, if we consider Sonny's struggles with crime, violence and drugs in the ghetto, his desire to escape and to build a completely new identity is what gives him hope. What's important for Sonny is that he learned from his mistakes and sought to better himself. On the contrary, Benji has an easier life, thanks to his family's wealth. He does not have to struggle to work to pay for his studies as Sonny does. Rather, the only reason he works is so that he can better enjoy his holidays. He dreams of a day when people will not see him anymore as "Benji" but as "Ben"; he dreams of growing up. Benji's life is mostly uneventful: it is concerned with him and his peers enjoying their summer adventures. Selina's life differs greatly from that of the two boys. Her family moves from Barbados to New York City, where they live in a brownstone house. Her development as a black woman, both physically and sexually, is difficult since she is uncertain about who she is. In her ethnic community, buying a house is the ultimate status symbol, which is an influence of the dominant America society, but the "Brown girl" soon realizes that this is not a personal aspiration of hers. Consequently, instead of joining the Barbadian Association and becoming a doctor as her mother would like, she pursues an independent life as a dancer. Despite the differences between Sonny, Benji, and Selina, language and education provide hope, enlightenment, and eventually freedom.

In conclusion, these novels have been chosen for this dissertation because they represent the Bildungsroman within the context of African American and American Carribean ethnicity. The Bildungsroman genre is used by each of these African

American authors to represent the dual struggle of being an adolescent and belonging to an ethnic heritage. In contrast to white protagonists, the journey these children face in discovering their own selves is more complicated because of the difficulty in navigating the realities of the tension between their assigned and intimate identities, so that they may develop a positive black identity that is distinct from the stereotypical expectations of others.

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